THE SUN WILL SHINE

By

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CHAPTER I

"YOU would never desert us!"

"It is not that, mother," said Sonia. "I'm not trying to desert you and father."

"But what else is it?" Mrs. May cried piteously.

"You don't realise," said Sonia, "that I can't stay here in Lulham. We're as poor as mice. Poorer, because there are no nice free crumbs for us. You and father are worrying your heads off, and you don't know how much difference it could make to us all if I did something to help you."

"But you do help us, dear. The flowers; and—and father's study; and just to have you with us helps us, Sonia. It helps us to be happy."

It was the old, old argument between parents and child, although, as usual, it seemed new.

"You two would always be happy, mother, with or without me."

"Oh, darling! Oh, no!" Mrs. May cried. But she knew, with guilty surprise, that it was true. "It is harder to part with an only child, Sonia," she insisted, "and father and I have never thought of you doing anything to earn your own living. We had no idea that you had even thought of it."

"Then what did you think was going to happen to me?" Sonia asked rather desperately.

The moment she had asked this, she was rather sorry. It seemed unkind to put such a definite question to such an indefinite and sweet mother. But then it would have seemed just as unkind to put it to her dreamy father. For these two, Sonia always thought, did not live in a real world at all. In fact, they had a realm of their own,

and the most tempestuous event in it had been the arrival, twenty-one years ago, of herself. They were quite terrifyingly unable to face facts, and although they had begun to be a little nervous, they could not actually visualise the mortgage on the cottage being called in, and having to give up the small place which had been to them the happiest and most beautiful home in the world. They knew quite well that they could not keep up the payments, and yet, thought Sonia feverishly, they could not imagine the inevitable result.

She urged seriously:

"Mother, what are you going to do if you have to give up Lulham Cottage?"

"I don't understand you, my dear. Your father and I would never give it up."

"But," Sonia persisted, "the cottage is mortgaged up to the last pennyworth; and, anyhow, you are behind with the interest already."

Then she was sorry again, because of her mother's dismay; futile foolish dismay that was yet sweet because it had in it the protective element of all maternity.

"I didn't want you, a young girl, to know about that. How did you know, Sonia?"

"I have watched you and father," Sonia explained patiently, "and I have heard all sorts of things you have said when you haven't thought I noticed; and the other day I went to the bank manager."

"But, darling, bank managers don't tell!"

"They don't tell," Sonia answered, "but when I asked him if he thought I ought to take a job or not, he was quite positive that I ought."

"You should never have done that," her mother protested.

"It doesn't matter," said Sonia, "with an old friend like him."

"You haven't asked your father."

"I want to ask him this morning."

"Put it off," said Mrs. May coaxingly, "he's busy, and you know when he's reading seriously, he hates any tiresome question to crop up."

"He's not reading seriously," said Sonia. "Nothing is serious except the dilemma that you are in."

"He hates money," Mrs. May murmured.

"He needs it," said Sonia.

Her mother veered a little, she thought, to her side. But she tried to procrastinate.

"Why must we decide everything this morning?"

"I'll tell you that presently," Sonia said; "but I assure you that it must be decided this morning unless you want to be very hurt and disappointed, darling; and I would hate that."

For she had made up her mind that, failing these two darlings' "decision" within an hour or two, she would appal them by going without it. And also the matter of a decision was only a courtesy extended by a rebellious if loving daughter to the sweetest and most impossible of parents.

They went on shelling peas. Outside the window was the garden which her mother and father, ever since she could remember, had loved so much. They regarded it as a land of treasure. She could remember the planting and growing of nearly every flower. She understood how tremendously they were attached to it. She understood everything, she told herself, except this stubborn, yet helpless, point of view. Or was it a lack of point of view? Suddenly she went to the kitchen door and called her father.

"Can you come and talk to us, Daddy?"

The study door opposite across the minute hall opened and he stood there, thin, charming, white-haired; a scholarly baby, just as she always thought of him.

"Can't you come in here?" he asked dreamily. "I've simply no time."

"We haven't time either," said Sonia.

She sighed. He never understood that the practical things of life had to be faced first, and dreaming among his books was an unprofitable occupation which should come second.

"Mother and I are really working, dads. We have to get the lunch this morning. Please come to us."

So then he came in. He was always like that too, kind, sweet, whimsical, obliging, and he never argued and he never fought. That's just it, Sonia thought. They never fight, either of them. He sat down at the kitchen table and his fine, long hands began to shell peas too. "This lovely opaque green," he murmured as the pods fell. "Very pleasant occupation." Overhead they could hear the tramp of the little maid, sweeping and dusting the bedrooms.

"Well," he inquired, "what is it?"

His wife replied:

"Sonia wants to go away."

"Go away!" he echoed. "Where to? Do you mean to stay with . . . an old school friend . . . or to the seaside." The pods seemed to fall in rhythm with his delightful slow voice. "Or what is it you want, little one?"

But she knew that he did not ask these questions seriously. All he could think about when he thought of the movements of a girl was that she would stay with an old school friend, or be amusing herself in some trivial or picturesque way.

"I've got to work," she said determinedly.

"Work?" he repeated. "You're working, dear. Charming work. Sweetheart," he said to his wife, "these pea pods against Sonia's white dress, and the lap of your blue pinafore . . . very lovely."

"I've been telling Sonia, Gilbert——"

Sonia went on recklessly: "I know everything, father. I realise how poor we are. I know we are in debt to the butcher, and I know that mother has not really paid the grocer's bill in full for six months."

"They don't mind," he said, quickly and earnestly. "They trust us."

"They don't," Sonia contradicted, "they trust your intentions, but that is all."

"What a little analyst," he said, "always looking underneath. Our peas are finer this year." He let a few dribble through his thin fingers.

But Mrs. May murmured:

"I wish we could pay them. I do, Gilbert. I do. It hasn't felt quite right."

Sonia went on:

"Tell me exactly what you want me to do, if I'm not to work and earn an income to help you and myself."

They murmured in unison; vague things.

Then he said: "Naturally your mother and I thought . . ."

Here her mother took it up.

"We thought you would marry, Sonia. We cannot think of anything more beautiful for any girl to do. The sweetest thing in the whole world is love."

"That's a question of opinion," said Sonia ignorantly; "but whom am I to marry?"

"One day," Mrs. May began, "some one will turn up."

"No one turns up here," Sonia insisted. "No one will turn up in Lulham. And, anyway, mother, what is your precedent for saying that? Did all the girls in your day get married? Weren't there hundreds and thousands of unwanted old maids? Only you don't wish to admit it. Here in Lulham there are girls just eating their hearts out to get away, to go anywhere,

to do anything, to meet anybody who would change life a little for them."

They looked at her in real astonishment, these two parents. They were aghast and puzzled, but they began to take her quite seriously now.

She was glad that it hadn't taken longer to bring them at least to this effective attitude of listening. She was relieved that they hadn't put her off like the vicar had put off his daughters, until finally they took matters into their own hands—as she would have done—and no one knew now where they were, except that it was somewhere abroad, and that their letters home came very seldom. And there was the doctor's daughter who had grown a little quieter and a little bleaker, till now she was devoted to what the old people of the place called approvingly her good works. But Sonia, herself then a small child, could remember her as a young girl, fresh from school, hoping for everything that had never happened.

"Don't you realise," she said, "that it's not the same nowadays as it was in your time?"

"We do know it," said Mrs. May eagerly. "We have always wanted you to go about and be free to make your own friends."

"Within a radius of ten miles," Sonia reminded her.

"We sent you away to school, Sonia."

"I know you did," said Sonia, "and what was the use of that? I would rather have gone to some Commercial College and learned some useful trade."

Two cries of horror met that.

"What do you think you can do," said her father, "and where do you want to do it, and when? You would not go before mother's birthday, would you?"

"Mother's birthday is four months ahead," said Sonia, "and I must be off to-morrow."

The shelling of peas stopped.

"You don't mean that, my dear? You haven't really done anything behind our backs, Sonia?"

"It was the only way to do it," she excused herself hurriedly, "and so I—I have arranged it all. I am twenty-one."

Her heart ached, and tears were behind her eyes, but an exultation, a jubilation seized her as, ever so gently, she laid down that gage.

"Well, then," said her father very quietly, "tell us what you have done."

"I have taken a secretaryship in London."

"What kind of secretaryship?" Mrs. May faltered. "You don't mean you are going to an office every day, getting plainer and plainer?"

"Not so plain as I should get in Lulham," said Sonia, and then—she kept on being so sorry for them—she explained cajolingly and impulsively:

"You know perfectly well, only you haven't noticed much, that I have been acquiring all sorts of useful things this last year. You haven't noticed it, but I took a correspondence course in shorthand out of my dress-money. You have forgotten, when the vicar hurt his hand, he dictated his sermons to me, and I really have a very good speed. You don't know that I have been out into Taunton when you thought I was going to see those girls I went to school with. I was really taking lessons in bookkeeping and typing. I have kept up my languages all this year while you two dears have been dreaming as usual, and enlarging the garden, and refusing to face the facts of life and the trouble that is coming on. I have been trying to get up something useful, although heaven knows it has been hard enough. And then, father," she said, laying her hand on his, "I have to thank you for a great deal, you know."

"Of course the child has a lot to thank you for, Gilbert," her mother murmured devotedly, and he

answered devotedly back: "Nothing to what she should thank you for, sweetheart."

Oh, their fairy tales!

"You have taught me to read, father," said Sonia. "Without you, I'd never have read the classics, and I have an idea that will be specially useful in the job I'm going to."

Her mother was clasping and unclasping her very small hands in the lap of the blue pinafore.

"But you haven't told us what is this work, except that it's secretarial."

"It is for a Sir Hugo Dereham," Sonia said. "The advertisement was in *The Times* last week, and when I wrote stating my qualifications and offering to give my social references—that is what I went to see our bank manager for really, and the vicar is giving me one too——"

Cries of horror again.

"But, Sonia, behind our back!"

She went on:

"And when I had sent my photograph, I was accepted almost at once."

"By Sir Hugo Dereham?" said Mrs. May, suddenly leaning forward with a colour in her little elfin face, and then her eyes met her husband's.

"By some relative of his who does business for him apparently," Sonia explained.

"But this Sir Hugo Dereham," said Mrs. May, "what kind of a man is he? How old? Is he rich? Is he married? Are you staying in his house or shall you have rooms?"

"It's too far to go," said her father, "much too far."

"Wait a minute, Gilly, darling; I want Sonia to tell me all about Sir Hugo Dereham, because we ought to know."

Sonia said:

"Very well, I knew you would say that. I knew you would ask for every particular, although, as I say, I am twenty-one, I am modern, and I am able to look after myself far better than you are able to look after yourselves. The last time I was in Taunton I looked him up in the public library, and he's a noted traveller, he's thirty-five, he's unmarried, and he's the fifth baronet. Will that do?"

"We should like to see a photograph of him."

"I can't very well ask my future employer for that, Mums."

"I suppose she can't," said her father.

"The necessary thing was that he should see mine."

"But what photograph did you send?" her mother asked, "because you haven't had one taken, darling, since you played the school teacher in the play in the village hall last winter."

Then for the first time her daughter giggled.

"That was the one I sent."

"But Sonia, spectacles and all!"

"Spectacles and all," said Sonia recklessly. "After all, if I am asked why I don't wear them now, I can always say my eyesight has rapidly improved."

There was now an air of mysterious smiling anticipation about her mother that irritated Sonia faintly. That dreamy mother who had always prophesied for her daughter a perfect romance was already off on some secret trail, at the end of which she saw some fairy prince, riches and happiness ever after. Her little elfin face was to be read clearly as a child's primer.

"They are incorrigible, these two," Sonia thought rather despairingly even while she smiled, "they will never agree to facts, and they will always hope for the impossible."

"Don't make romances, Mums, about me," she said.

"I am going to do a job of work, and that is all there is to it."

Mrs. May mused on, her thoughts like words on the air.

It was her father who began then asking more direct questions.

"And what will you get paid, Sonia?"

"Five pounds a week."

"Five pounds a week!" he echoed, amazed. "But I thought secretaries were poor. Five pounds a week is riches."

She said quickly:

"But that's what I have to thank you for, darling. It is my reading; it's all you have taught me that makes me worth that to this particular man. It seems he is writing a history of some old place he inherited some years ago, and has never lived in, and the ordinary secretary wouldn't suit him."

"What place is that?" said her father, and now she saw him suddenly interested. She saw the dreamer awake, for he loved old places, and old things, and old stories.

"It's called Fennimore, and I think it's on the borders of Wales."

He cried out in delight.

"Why, my dear, it's one of the most interesting places in England. I can give you the whole history myself, or almost."

His long white hands dropped the peas and fumbled for a pencil in his pocket. He picked up a sugar bag, and traced for her a genealogical table.

"This Sir Hugo Dereham," he said, "must be another branch of the family, because the Fennimores have always lived at Fennimore from the time of the old Welsh kings."

He sat there immersed, and as she looked at him,

she thought: "That's all he cares about, and no doubt it's very beautiful, but he doesn't see the practical side at all. He will think all day now about Fennimore, but he will never think that little Lulham cottage may be lost to him at any time."

"You must always think about great things, mustn't you, darling?" she said suddenly.

He smiled at her, got up, and roamed off to his study.

Her mother answered her.

"Yes, father always must think of great things. That's what I love him for so much."

"You won't be miserable when I'm away, will you?" Sonia implored, but she knew that really they would not be miserable. They would go on dreaming, and they would still have the sweetest thing in the world.

Now she was wild with delight. She was free to think with certainty of the longed for escape from this so tiny world. She would be entirely the practical secretary, entirely the modern woman of the world, for that was what, it had been explained to her, Sir Hugo Dereham wanted. Though also he required culture and knowledge, adaptability, command of two languages, and a willingness to work at all hours; and he expected all this embodied in a very responsible personality. When lunch was over, she read over again carefully the letters she had received, written by a Francis Selwinn. He was very business-like, this Francis Selwinn. He stated that he was Dereham's cousin, and that Dereham suffered ill health. His demands were very explicit, and he insisted on being very fully satisfied. She was not to live in Dereham's house, but in rooms, or, this Selwinn had written, "there is an excellent ladies' hostel or club near. It is necessary for you to be near, because you may be telephoned at any hour, and Sir Hugo will want you to go to him whenever he feels fit enough to work." Selwinn

had promised to meet her train, because, he said, there were things that he would rather explain to her verbally than write them. It seemed to her, as she read that letter, to be unusual that such a responsible woman as he was expecting should need meeting, but no doubt there were small difficulties that he wanted to smooth out for his sick relative's comfort.

She laughed to herself, up there in her little room, at her parents' entire lack of practical curiosity.

The mention of an historical sounding name had sent them both off again into their eternal land of dreams, and they had not even asked to see these letters or to know any more about the terms of her engagement. They took the world on trust, much as they believed that it took them and all nice people.

She put on her hat and went out into the streets of the little town. She was going to say good-bye to young women less lucky than she, to the girls who would confide, " Oh, Sonia, I do envy you, but I can't leave mother." Or to rather older ones, single women of over thirty whose eyes had begun to look restless and bleak, even if they still laughed and chaffed at the local tennis club, or at the little subscription dances; and these would say, " Once I thought I would get away, but I never have, and it's rather late to begin training now, I suppose, isn't it ? "

She went, full of these reflections, first to the doctor's house, and said good-bye to his daughter, and then she went to the vicarage. Those daughters having fled, the vicar and his wife both rebuked her :

" So you are going too, Sonia. Do you think it is quite right ? "

" Why not ? " she countered, but they could only shake their heads and murmur about her dear mother missing her ; they acknowledged that an only child's duty was no doubt hard, yet, it seemed to them, plain.

She would have argued that, as she had argued it before, only that it was never any use reasoning with middle-aged or old people. They hated progress, they looked upon their own youth as a precedent for all youth that came after them, and they were afraid to face the future.

So she went home gladly to the happier task of packing. She was sorting out all her clothes, sitting on the floor of her room, when her mother stole in, a little vague and dismayed over all this facing of facts.

"Sonia," she asked, "have you enough?" And although she never had had quite enough any more than her mother had, she answered:

"More than enough, Mums, and these are the last things I shall ever have to ask you to buy for me. Now *I'll* help *you*."

"You know we always look on you as our baby!" Mrs. May cried.

Sonia thought: "No. No. You're my old babies, you two," but said emphatically: "That's the mischief all over the world. Parents looking upon their grown-up girls as their babies just a little too long."

CHAPTER II

WHEN her train drew into Paddington, she looked from the great bustling station, sick with stage fright. The curtain was rung up, and one was asking oneself—oneself planted in the middle of the stage: "Will it be a failure or a success?" It was actually the first time she had ever been to London. She knew that was not a thing to which one confessed; in fact, it was almost incredible; but there were actually several girls like herself in Lulham who had never gone

farther afield than the county town, or perhaps down to the sea on the Devon shore. Life slipped smoothly by, and they did not realise the extent of their worldly ignorance and their incapacities. For herself, she was going to change all that. She was going to look after her two dear people who had been so pathetically and charmingly incapable of properly looking after her. And then, emerging from the train, she saw a tall man with the carriage of a soldier walking up and down, scanning the compartments. Immediately she guessed he was that Francis Selwinn, because, somehow, he was a living embodiment of his letters ; cheerful, quick, definite, and yet with a suave touch of charm that had already intrigued her in his written word. Now with the same flash of mischief that had made her send the prim photograph, she watched him walking slowly down the length of the long train. Of course she was nervous about that photograph. It was sheer deception, and there had been guilt in the sending of it as well as mischief. She had wanted to look such a very responsible person.

She saw him speak to a porter and find her luggage which had now been put out on the platform. Then he took up his stand by it, waiting for the owner, so there was nothing left for her to do but to claim it at once. He took off his hat, and stared at her with incredulity.

"You aren't Miss Sonia May ?" he asked.

She had to take a long breath to answer :

"I am Sonia May ; and you are Mr. Selwinn ?"

His look changed from incredulity to dismay, and then to a decided amusement.

"We'll leave the luggage in the cloak-room," he said to the porter, and to her he added, in a voice which was still surprised as his look had been :

"I think, perhaps, you and I had better have a little talk, Miss May, and maybe we could lunch somewhere, and pick up the luggage after ?"

They were in a taxi-cab. How quickly things happened here! She was aware, by sheer woman's instinct, that at the moment of seeing her, this man had changed his plan of procedure. He had surely meant to take the spectacled and capable-looking Miss May straight to the ladies' hostel or club which in his last letter he had suggested as her suitable accommodation, and now here he was bearing her off to lunch, for the first time in her life at —where would it be?—a great London restaurant, or at a club, or—where? She was as thrilled as a small child to whom Madame Tussaud's or the Circus has been unexpectedly suggested. But she managed to remain, outwardly, very calm, while she looked, fascinated, at the busy streets.

"Where would you like to go?" he was asking her, and she answered carefully.

"I don't know any of the interesting places." Reminding herself, "In fact, I don't know any place at all."

He thought for a moment. She did not know that he was wondering if he would take her to the ladies' annexe of his own famous club, and that he considered quickly that it would not be wise; then if he would take her to the Berkeley or to one of the smart little places. In the end he decided, without consulting her further, on the more impersonal *milieu* of the Savoy.

"The Savoy, I think," he remarked, and she replied demurely that it would do very nicely. "Although, of course, I can go straight to that hostel which you have so kindly recommended me," she said.

"Ah, but as I told you, I really think I had better talk to you first. It isn't quite, *quite* what I expected." He gave her a smiling look, quizzing her jovially; and she took heart.

So they came to the Savoy. She had all the usual girl's reluctance to seem inexperienced, and all the usual young girl's feeling that she was being looked at and

judged. She had to surmount the fact that she was not the grave woman he had expected, but little Sonia May of Lulham, entirely like herself and no one else. She was not nervous about her clothes, because the little orange linen frock and hat that she and her mother had stitched together had been made up from some of those marvellous patterns given in the women's magazines, over which all feminine Lulham eagerly pored. But she was anxious not to seem frivolous, not to seem to have sailed too readily under false colours, not to seem an impostor. So she went very gravely beside Selwinn into the vestibule of the famous grill-room, and when he had seated her in a corner and an attentive waiter, who evidently knew him, sprang to attend them, and he had asked, " What about a cocktail ? " she took her courage in both hands.

" Yes, please ! "

Then she wondered if that was a wrong move. Should she have been entirely the woman of business, uninterested by a scene of charm and frivolity ? Refusing a cocktail—whatever a cocktail was ?

" What will you have ? " he asked blandly. " White Lady, Blue Snake, Clover Club, Martini, Bronx, Manhattan——" He paused and then she saw his nice kind eyes shining with laughter. So :

" I don't know any of them," she confessed bravely.

He was kind, this man, in a worldly, superior, laughing way, and he said :

" Very well then, they will shake you up something absolutely non-alcoholic, but just as amusing to a very young little lady like you." And for himself he decided, " I'll have a pink gin."

She could not help exclaiming : " I didn't know gin was pink ! "

And he answered, " Neither it is. The colour is due to the spot of bitters."

They sat together, and he asked her about her

journey, if she came often to London, of the work she had done, and so on. But his questioning was very comfortable, very suave; it did not make her ill at ease, and somehow between questions he left her time to be interested in the people coming in and going out. She thought that never had she seen so many charming and apparently happy butterflies, so many well-dressed men who looked as if they knew exactly where they were going; why, when, and how. They were different from the Lulham men who, for the most part, were rather sleepy, moved slowly, seemed very contented with themselves, and entirely unconcerned either with the present or the future. In fact, most of them lived in a country called the Good Old Days. She felt herself now in the middle of a new stirring life, and her eyes fervently devoured the hats and frocks of two or three women, of whom she said to herself, "They must be actresses." Then a famous face entered, and Selwinn, seeing her lean forward eagerly, confirmed:

"Yes, that is John Seagull, the actor fellow. You will probably meet him in the crowd that come to Hugo's.' He said "Hugo," and not "Sir Hugo" to her, and she noticed it. He went on: "You have seen him act, of course?"

She was acutely aware that it was a social punishment. She said, wishing she could answer, "Yes, at the St. James's Theatre——":

"Yes, I have seen him when he was touring; once." Her voice was a little smaller and faintly reluctant. Then they went into lunch.

"I didn't book a table," said Selwinn easily as they moved, but it seemed as if the news of his arrival had preceded him into the grill-room, for the maître d'hôtel met them, smiling, and led them to one of the best tables against the wall. Selwinn handed her the menu. She was lost in its complexities, and chose guardedly:

"I would just like cold chicken and salad, please."

Again he helped her, and ordered for both of them iced melon, and the cold chicken she had asked for, which was in aspic, and a marvellous salad to follow, of which he noted to her:

"That's a Japanese salad; I hope you like it?"

He ordered a hock cup to be mixed, and then he said, smiling: "Of course I suggested that ladies' hostel or club affair to you, not knowing you would be quite like you are, but now that I have seen you, I think more than ever that possibly it is the best place. A relative of mine, one of those silly charitable women interested in movements, gave me the address of the place when I told her old Hugo was having a lady secretary up from the wilds."

Sonia said demurely:

"But I'm not an object of charity." And he laughed.

"No, no! But I dare say it will be all right. We can inspect the place together. I can trade on my relative's name and impeccability if they won't let me in."

He kept looking at her.

"You aren't *at all* what I expected," he repeated.

"I hope you don't mind," said Sonia. "Of course country photographers aren't very clever, are they? And then the photograph was taken a year or so ago, and then——"

"And then," he finished for her, "you picked it out carefully and sent it on purpose."

How she blushed!

"It was the latest photograph I had."

"Don't let's bother about that," he answered, "I'd better begin to tell you about Hugo."

But for a moment or two he sat silent, looking before him as if carefully considering the exact instructive explanation he would give her. And while he thus sat

reflecting, she looked at his profile unobtrusively. He was an astonishingly good-looking man, she thought; he was probably about the same age as Sir Hugo himself; or younger. He looked as if he could be alert and acute in every aspect of life. At the same time he had the air of a man of leisure, and he certainly knew how to entertain a woman and make her content. He was tanned very deeply, but not as if with fierce suns and rough winds. Rather, he looked as if he basked often in the temperate sunshine of the Riviera, and she tried to remember if she had not seen his photograph somewhere among those groups of notabilities pictured for the edification of the less lucky in the illustrated papers. He began speaking:

"My cousin is compiling a history of an old place he inherited when he came into the title, but it is two centuries since the owners lived there."

"I know," she said quickly. "Fennimore."

He gave her an interested glance. "Ah, you have found out so much."

"Of course. I tried to."

"That sounds as if you were rather a thorough-going person," he remarked. And went on: "The place is very lovely, I believe, but rather a ruin. It has been left to caretakers, and sometimes for years together the agent of the estate has lived in the old house."

"My father told me a good deal about it. He was very interested. He is by way of being an antiquary," she explained, "though he is so lazy and dreamy, poor darling, that he has never made what he could of his abilities and all his knowledge. Mother always says so."

"Ah, that is a way good wives have!"

She told him: "My father is Professor May. History. But for years he has dropped the 'professor.' You see, he just likes dreaming and browsing about, with mother. He is terribly unpractical. But he was able to tell me

quite a lot about the history of Fennimore when I mentioned it to him. One of the Welsh kings once lived there and then gave it to an ancestor of the family."

"Oh, well," said Selwinn, "that is all to the good. My cousin will be pleased, I expect, and it may help you with your work."

"You were going to tell me about Sir Hugo himself?"

"Oh, yes. Well, my cousin has lived abroad a great deal, and he didn't come home till a year ago. He has done a good deal of important service for the British Government." He paused. "The kind of service, the kind of magnificent actions, and sacrifices that the public doesn't hear much about. However, he is out of all that, and home for good now."

He looked half-sad, and yet there was a queerly calculating expression on his face. He went on: "My cousin's an invalid. He ruined his health in bad climates, and he is subject to periods when he finds it difficult to do anything at all, and he gets a good deal of pain. He wanted to go and live at Fennimore and begin to restore the place, but it is necessary for him to be near his doctors in London, so, beyond a visit or two and the collection of all the family chronicles he could find, he has not been able to do any more about that. He is in a hurry to get his book compiled."

"Surely," she ventured, "to work in a hurry must be rather bad for him just now. If he is ill, I mean."

Selwinn hesitated, and again on his face was that half-sad, yet half-calculating, expression. "Well," he responded, "you don't quite understand his reasons."

He looked down into her vivid face, while in his mind was the thought, "I wonder if it would suit the book to tell her. Shall I give her a hint?" But he was still so surprised by her youth, by her astonishing fairness; and he was also tickled to see that she was the prettiest girl within sight in that famous restaurant

where pretty women abounded. And these things together—apart from diplomacy or his cousin's wishes—made him decide, "I think it is a little grim for her; yes, decidedly too grim."

He replied aloud, "I wanted you to get a very good idea of your duties and the kind of atmosphere in which you will carry them out, Miss May. You will understand that my cousin cannot always keep regular hours of work; his hours sometimes for days together are regulated by his health, and yet, as I say, he is in a hurry to finish this book. He is not looking so much for an applauding public for his work as to make a kind of reliable and picturesque family chronicle of the house of Fennimore."

"I can understand," she breathed eagerly.

Lunch had passed like a dream; not that she had not taken literally everything Selwinn had told her; not that she forgot any of what she solemnly felt to be of such importance—the rescue of the two old babies she had left behind. All that was clear and urgent in her brain. But it had been such a beautiful hour, without any precedent in the whole of her twenty-one years, and when they rose to go—she making the move, remembering that she was merely a secretary, and must not take up too much of this man's time—she was very regretful. A little of that bright amazement which Selwinn had amusedly noted faded from her face. He noted the fading also, again with amusement, and thought to himself, "Good heavens, there is no débutante I have ever known with such a perfectly fresh capacity for enjoyment, and such divine inexperience. The whole world is new to this girl. And," he thought, "God help her!"

"And now for Hugo," he said, his hand touching her elbow as he guided her out into the courtyard, "but we will make a *dêtour* and pick up your baggage."

"It is very good of you," she murmured, embarrassed. "You are taking a tremendous lot of trouble about me."

He looked down at her good humouredly, with that mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Not a bit, little girl," he said, "I was doing it for Hugo without any idea that there would be some sort of reward in it for myself."

He laughed.

"I mustn't talk like that," he said; "but still, it was jolly taking you to lunch."

The commissionaire had by now signalled a taxi-cab and he ushered her in.

"Hugo doesn't know that I was meeting you," he explained, "and I hope you won't mention it to him. That's another thing for you to remember, please. I just took it upon myself to do so, because, as a matter of fact, he left this whole business of engaging a secretary to me. You see, I felt that he ought to have professional help for this book business."

"But hasn't he had a secretary at all up till now?"

"Well, he has had a secretary of sorts," said Selwinn, grinning, and then the grin left his face and his mouth set, so that Sonia thought to herself, "He's not quite as easy and good-natured as he seems."

The hood of the taxi-cab was down, the spring day was beautiful, and she was able to look about her at the great strange city. She was entranced, and after they had collected her luggage and driven away again, she grew more and more entranced. They crossed the Bayswater Road and went into the park, where blazes of early summer flowers astonished her. Lulham people were apt to say heartily, "Oh, I would never live in London for anything; no green trees, no fresh air, no flowers; give me my garden." Sour grapes! Here were great beds of flowers and blossoming trees and bushes, and vast vistas of green, and once more she secretly

derided Lulham's notions and Lulham's self-content. She thought, " Mums and Dad shall come up and have a lovely day exploring when I have saved a little money."

Then Selwinn was speaking again.

" You will like Hugo's house," he said, " it's very quiet. It's in Hilton Square. Not very Mayfairish, but it's peaceful and it suits him as he is now, poor chap. After all, in London, all one's friends can easily come to see one. By the way, I would have ordered his car to fetch you, only, you see, he didn't know that I was meeting you, and I couldn't bring mine, for the simple reason that at the moment I haven't got one."

He laughed cheerily.

" Broke," he said.

He saw her very wide eyes of surprise, and he knew what she was thinking. Innocent thing! She was thinking : " And he took me to lunch at the Savoy——"

" Oh, it doesn't matter being broke in London," he said easily, " so long as one's credit has not all gone. I can still sign a bill for food and drink anywhere."

" That's not what I call being broke."

" What do you call being broke ? " he asked.

" Not having shillings," she said simply.

" Yes, that would be rather the end of things," he agreed. He looked a little rueful at such a prospect.

" Oh, no," she exclaimed, " not the end of things. One can always fight."

" A bit grim, isn't it ? " he suggested.

" I never thought so," she said reflectively.

" Good girl," said Selwinn in a lazy manner of detachment from so tiresome a problem, and they turned out of the gardens. It suddenly occurred to her to ask exactly where he was taking her now. He told her :

" Well, I think you had better go along and look at this hostel or club place—I'm hazy as to the distinctions. And then I'll explain to you how to get to Hugo's

house, and then you'd better present yourself, and please don't mention that I met you. When I first saw you I was afraid I'd rather messed things up perhaps, but on the whole, a girl like you may be for the best."

"You make it sound a little mysterious," said Sonia artlessly.

"Oh, it's not really mysterious," he assured her pleasantly, "and if Hugo seems surprised, just don't take any notice. Fob him off! Tell him you are really in earnest, and walk right into the work. I am in and out of the house a lot. You will often see me."

"What does that matter?" she wondered to herself, puzzled; "though it will be very nice."

They drew up at one of those Victorian houses bereft of their former placid arrogance, and now changed into one of the increasing number of residential clubs for women.

"I don't think, after all, I'll come in," he said, standing hat in hand on the doorstep. "Bit grim, these hen houses! Hugo's address, as you know, is 14 Hilton Square. You turn to your right at the end of this road and come right into the square; you will easily find the house. He's expecting you about four o'clock."

Then the big front door opened.

"Good-bye." He smiled charmingly; and she was inside.

It was not bad; in fact, it did not rob her at all of that bright sense of adventure with which she had undertaken all these things. She had a bedroom in no way inferior to her own shabby little room at home, and there was a general sitting-room which seemed to her to be huge. She accepted the accommodation and the terms meekly, a little in awe of the stout and very shrewd manageress.

"Full pension," said the manageress, "will be two guineas a week, but if you are not in to lunch or tea,

there is a reduction of seven and six, so if you are undecided at the moment—and you say you aren't quite sure of your working hours—you can begin with full pension, and then rearrange at your convenience."

"That is splendid. Thank you."

"I hope you will continue to think so," said the manageress with acid humour, "there is nothing much to grumble at here, but that doesn't prevent people from grumbling, does it?"

She went away, leaving a latch-key and a card of rules.

When Sonia looked in her glass, she was astonished to see what a flushed, bright-eyed, smiling, exalted girl looked back at her. She unpacked, and set out her little clock and her writing materials and the hair brushes that she had had on her twenty-first birthday from her parents, and a cut-glass powder bowl that the Lulham doctor's daughter had given her on that same occasion, saying, "I'll never use powder now, but you are younger, and no doubt you are different." And so in a few minutes the little room began subtly to take on a familiar aspect. The clock hands pointed to three-thirty and, therefore, when she had wondered whether to change the orange linen frock and hat for something more sober—with a faint idea that an invalid should not be startled in even the tiniest degree, by the tiniest detail—and decided against it, she went downstairs and out into the street. It seemed strange to pull that massive front door shut behind her. It clanged importantly as if impressing upon a girl that this was the first time she had adventured out alone upon a career in a great city; that she had most significantly clanged the door of her adopted home upon her, because, when she came back to-day, she would be a new person, one of the world's real workers; and so, surely, content. She turned to the right, and found herself in the great calm space of Hilton Square. Here she was once more

exclaiming to herself, "And they love declaring, in Lulham, that cities have no space, no flowers and trees!" For here again great old trees brooded over the lawns in the square's centre, flowers blazed behind iron railings, a few people were walking on fresh green grass there in London's heart, and when she looked around at all the tall calm houses she observed their window-boxes to be full of their summer planting.

She rang the bell at Number 14, and a butler answered it.

She was expected. The butler took her straight through into a library at the back of the house. Its wide and agreeable windows looked out upon a paved garden, where again were flower beds and a fountain. How lovely London was! So this was a closed-in city! How right she had been to shut her ears for all this last year to the didactic voice of Lulham explaining to its girls imaginary dangers of which it really knew nothing. She now saw Lulham's matrons and grey-beards as a lot of unintelligent fools, preaching from precedents which they never even troubled to verify. "When I was a girl, my dear," or "when I was a lad, my boy," seemed to them a sufficient curriculum for all behaviour. And she looked around her at the room which was as agreeable as the prospect outside the open windows. It was a man's room without doubt, warm leather of mellowed colour, old walnut wood, many books, some marvellous ivories on a very wide, heavy mantelpiece; deep chairs; surely the most massive writing-table in the world that looked as if it was really used by some one with real business to do at it.

She had no idea how sweetly slim and young and fair she appeared to the man who almost at once opened the door very quietly and came in.

He entered slowly, with an effect of hesitating on the threshold to take a comprehensive view of his new

secretary. He had paused; he stood perfectly still for a full half-minute. Near the opened windows she also stood arrested, because he was not in the very least like what she had expected. What had she expected? Well, perhaps a smaller man—why, she could not have said—she thought of rather a spare, dry man, and, if interested in antiquarian subjects, he might even have some of the dreamy quality of her own father. She expected to see some one who looked older, although she herself would know on reflection that that was foolish, because even to twenty-one, thirty-five is not a great age. She saw a tall broad man with very dark hair; his eyes were light and grey and piercing, his mouth a long line in a strong face. He carried himself like a strong, arrogant man, not like the invalid Selwinn had told her to expect. He was an impatient man, she felt, also probably quick-tempered, and he could be exigent. Her youth sensed these things self-protectively. And then his arrested stare softened, the long mouth curled at the corners into a half-rueful smile, and he spoke. She liked his voice, it was deep, and as confident as he looked himself.

"I was told my new secretary was waiting."

She gathered all her courage together, and replied:

"Sir Hugo Dereham? Then I am your new secretary."

"But my cousin," he began, and then stopped.

He moved forward and held out his hand. She put hers into it, hoping that he could not feel through her glove how cold and nervous it was.

"Mr. Selwinn engaged me for you," she said in as business-like a voice as she could manage.

"But he did not say . . ." Hugo Dereham began; and again paused; and again he looked at her inscrutably.

"Please sit down," he said abruptly.

He pushed forward one of the deep leather chairs. She sat in it, feeling very frail and slight. He seated

himself in the swivel chair at the big writing-table and turned to face her. His elbows were on the arms of the chair, his finger-tips joined together, and alert to notice everything, she noticed his hands; hands of great accomplishment. No small, petty man would have such hands. They were governing hands, and yet, in some way, how they betrayed his illness; his weariness.

"What is your name?" he asked courteously. "You know mine, but my cousin has not enlightened me as to yours."

She told him.

"Sonia May."

"Sonia May," he repeated, and paused on the words as if savouring them. "Well," he said after a moment, "the name suits you, Miss May. I didn't quite expect to find a secretary like yourself waiting for me here. However——" Again he broke off. "You are capable? You know what I want, and you feel yourself able to undertake it?"

"Absolutely."

He smiled slightly.

"My cousin had all your references and your qualifications. He told me that they were most satisfactory, and I didn't trouble to see them for myself. In fact, I didn't go into the matter at all."

He could have added that he had had so serious a bout of illness and pain for the last few days that the doctors had forbidden the smallest extra source of fatigue, worry, or even thought. But he was not a man who cared to discuss or even own to his hated frailness, so he went on in that curt deep voice:

"I am assured that besides being quite a competent shorthand typist, you have actually some knowledge of the kind of work I am doing at the moment."

"Yes," she said, "through my father." And then she told him of the notes that her father had made for her.

He listened, that little dry smile again quirking his mouth.

" So it seems I am in luck," he said as courteously as he had first spoken. There was a slightly awkward pause during which she began to feel a little guilty, because of her deception. Serious as she had been, she had sent that photograph in a spirit of mischief, and knew it. It was the one heinous lapse in her business-like conduct. It had been so amusing to see herself dressed up as Miss Prim, the school teacher, in the yearly amateur theatrical entertainment which always enthralled Lulham for months ahead. In fact, as soon as one was over, there was excitement until the next occasion came round and the parts were cast by that unanswerable authority, the vicar, who had in his time, as he assured them during every rehearsal, played with the O.U.D.S. And now she said, half-apologetically :

" I am sorry I didn't send a more recent photograph, but I so seldom have one taken."

" What a pity," he said gravely, and then with that same dry smile he added, " I am afraid I didn't see your photograph at all, either, Miss May. As I told you, I left everything to my cousin."

She began to ask questions as to when he would want her the next day, and he answered : " I want you to hold yourself in readiness for me all day and every day, Miss May, although that is not likely to be quite as terrible as it sounds. I have days sometimes "—he paused—" when I shan't want you at all."

She thought of what Selwinn had said, and a little pang of pity was in her heart. She guessed what he meant, but as he sat talking to her, he looked so much the strong man in command of his own life, that she did not venture to say, " Mr. Selwinn told me you were rather an invalid," because nothing could be further from an invalid than this man looked, and she felt,

somehow, that in spite of Selwinn's denial of a mystery there was something just a trifle mysterious about the conditions in which she had been engaged.

"I am quite glad I'm not just a nine-till-six secretary," she said at last, for want of something better to say; and he replied:

"Those would be long hours, wouldn't they? Or don't you think so? I may ask for them."

"I mean," she hurried, "it's more exciting to work in rushes."

"It is," he agreed; "but you think that so definitely because you are so young. The very young love to live in spasms."

"I am twenty-one."

"Are you?" he said, again dryly, "A great age! Well, my cousin has all those details. If you are competent, that is all that matters to me, and I am sure Francis felt he had made a find, discovering a girl of your education. I understand from what you have said that perhaps you read with this father of yours."

"A great deal."

"What did you read?"

"Oh," she said, "Voltaire, Froude, Dante, Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Proust——"

"Good God!" he cried.

"Of course in translations," she confessed. "Father reads in the original. He studies heraldry too . . ."

"Well," he said gravely, "I am glad you don't read them in the original. I don't like people who are too improving, especially of your sex. And then your father is interested in heraldry? Oh, well, whatever smattering he has let you have, will make my work come more easily to you."

She murmured:

"I am very glad you think so, Sir Hugo. I shall want to please you."

"This is your first real job?" he asked, and she assented.

"And you didn't get your shorthand and typing at any of the institutions?"

"No, but I'm quite good." She felt that to be temerity, and began to blush.

"Speed won't matter greatly to us," he encouraged her. "I want intelligence just as much, and what I suppose we might call sympathy. That is to say, when I am working with you, I should like to feel that you are really not in the room at all."

Lulham men would here have remarked obviously and jocosely, "That's a funny fellow to say such a thing to a pretty girl," but she understood.

"You want some one," she said nervously, "who is what the Italians call '*simpatica.*'"

"I suppose so."

"Will you need me this afternoon, Sir Hugo?"

"Yes, I will," he said, as if on a sudden thought, his eyes still on her.

"Shall I take off my hat?"

"Well, just as you like," he said, and a faintly amused, sardonic look came over his face. "I don't want you for work, but I think, now I've seen you, that I would like you to stay to tea."

"That's very good of you, Sir Hugo."

"Not at all," he said. "Since you are here, and since you are a woman——" Here something seemed to make him break off.

"But, of course I'm a woman, Sir Hugo."

"I expected a man."

He said that bluntly; watching her.

She was conscious of a flaming dismay and embarrassment and for a few moments she could not speak. Her eyes shone brilliantly, because all at once there rose tears behind them. She kept the tears back. The affair

of the photograph was nothing now, but she felt more than ever that she had attained, if she had attained it, this pleasant work on false pretences.

"I didn't know," she stammered.

"Never mind," said Dereham, and he rose and went to the bell. To the butler who answered it, he gave instruction. "Barton, tea will be served in the drawing-room, and Miss May will pour out for me."

"Very good, sir," the butler said, while she still sat amazed and dismayed.

"After all," Dereham remarked—though she imagined nervously that he was not wholly pleased, "I suppose that there are a good many things an intelligent girl like yourself, who is going to be about the house at any time, can do. I have a lot of friends——" But here again he paused, and that sardonic smile twitched his mouth. "No," he amended, "no man has a lot of friends. I have a great many acquaintances, and about half a dozen friends, which is more than most people have, don't you think so, Miss May?"

She murmured some word or two, and looked at him uncertainly, and he said:

"I suppose that, at your age, you still think that the whole world is your friend, eh?"

"I haven't separated friends and acquaintances, I'm afraid, Sir Hugo."

"No?" he said easily. "At your time of life and experience I don't suppose you have. But to go on with what I was saying, I have hosts of acquaintances, and some are bound to come in this afternoon. After all, one thing a woman secretary can do for me, if she is tactful and a gentlewoman, is to help with this motley crew of people."

Sheer stage fright seized her. Was she to be pitch-forked straight into some smart society gathering, probably a cosmopolitan crowd, of people such as she

had never seen or heard of? She plucked up all her courage to stammer:

"Anything that I can do to help you, Sir Hugo, in any way, I shall, of course, be"—and she tried to recall the formal phrase used by the vicar's wife on social occasions—"charmed to do."

"If you are willing, Miss May," he said with his peculiar grave look, "that is all I shall expect. But I doubt if you will be any more charmed than I am. Well, will you keep your hat on, or take it off?"

Now again, Sonia thought of Lulham tea parties, formal ones where you stood up most of the time, and removed no outdoor clothing, unless your coat was very heavy—cocktail parties had not yet penetrated to Lulham—and the even more formal ones, when truly old-fashioned people asked you to a real tea, and you removed your hat and sat down to a spread table. Of course there were the easier, friendlier, more giggly tennis occasions, inaugurated by some of the daring young things, but those took place out of doors mostly, or, at the club, which, struggling into existence, was hardly on its legs even yet. And that did not count. The foolish problem around her home-made linen hat suddenly caused her to realise to the full how ridiculously and unreasonably inexperienced she was in every kind of way; and the narrowness of the confines in which those two dreamers had allowed her to grow up.

Was she to be considered as an inmate of Sir Hugo's house for the occasion, or not? She took her social stand by the behaviour of the vicar's wife, and managed a reply:

"Oh, thank you, Sir Hugo, I'll keep my hat on."

It was indeed foolish that such a tiny episode should give her that feeling, which she now suffered, of inferiority and despair, and distrust about her accomplishments which on the journey townwards had seemed so eminently satisfactory.

"All right," he said, the sardonic smile still lurking about his mouth, "let me take you into the drawing-room."

She began a little to fear and dislike Sir Hugo for that sardonic smile of his, but she must forgive him this and much more, she thought, as she walked beside him out of the library, because he was an invalid. She must never forget the confidences with which Selwinn had entrusted her, and in the light of this far more difficult dealing with Hugo Dereham, she saw Francis Selwinn in very rosy colours. It was a pleasure and a comfort to remember in what a friendly fashion he had met her at the train, and how naturally and informally he had entertained her at the restaurant which up till then had only been a famous name to her; and how he had said, "You will often see me, I am always in and out of the house."

Double doors were opened, and she saw into a big room of pastel colours, contrasted by great sheaves of gladioli, and what were to her extravagant great banks of roses of much the same flame colour, cunningly disposed here and there. She felt more scared, and because at least she could talk about flowers, or thought she could, she went over to the nearest roses, and touched a petal with nervous finger-tips.

"How lovely," she heard her voice say strangely.

"Aren't they?" Dereham answered casually behind her. "Know anything about roses?"

"Oh, yes." And she thought of her mother's dozen square yards of rose garden. It was declared in Lulham, "Mrs. May, of course, has a wonderful rose garden." Dereham went on: "That was the famous rose of last year, the Madame Fancé, bred by Dèfancé, the great French growers."

"Oh, yes," she heard her voice say; and she realised that her mother's Gloire de Dijon, Mermaids, Moss roses,

la France, Mrs. Williamsons, and so on, were merely village beauties.

"These florists' arrangements are always so formal. We will see whether you have a good hand with flowers, Miss May."

"But I couldn't do anything like that." She looked in awe at the elaborate perfection.

"I hope you can't," he said dryly; and then she heard the ringing of a bell. Guests! Already! She panicked speedily, and began to think that it was rather hard of him to expect her thus to fall in with all his unexpected demands. But there was nothing else for it, she said to herself, and she looked towards the tea table. It was a large table in one corner of the great room, and on it she saw an array of strange delicate sandwiches, and an extravagance of the most superior cakes. But besides all this she saw china that down at home would have been kept behind glass in family cabinets; and she saw a Queen Anne tea service, which she recognised because her father had taught her a great deal about old silver. He dreamed often over catalogues, none of whose items it was ever faintly possible that he could possess, and when she was a tiny child, she could remember, in the wonderful leisure of evenings, climbing up on the chair beside him as he sat with such catalogues spread out upon their dining-room table, and asking him, "What are you reading, Dads?" And he would answer, "I am reading about a teapot." And she would ask him, "What did it do?" And he would answer, "It held tea for two hundred years for a great many marvellous people, perhaps even people in crowns; certainly people in coronets; people in powder and white wigs; and silks and satins; and people in Josephine gowns, and after that people in crinolines. I'll draw the teapot for you." Then he would draw it, but when she said, "Will you draw the people, Dads?"

he never troubled about them. People were nothing to him, and he could never give her any pictures of them.

Almost immediately upon these memories she heard two or three cars drawing up one after the other, and visitors came in. They were followed by others in more or less quick succession, and she had little time to be surprised at their rather extraordinary variety, because with trembling hands and a very high beating heart, she was busying herself at the tea-table. She sat in a high-backed chair that she guessed her father would have rhapsodised over, and the flame coloured banks of roses and gladioli, and the shifting colours of women's frocks, and the deep, quick, easy voices of men, and the laughter and the casual witty way they had of greeting one another, all blurred together on her mind. Only a few people strolled up to the tea-table. It was already after five o'clock, and Barton, the butler, was bringing in the first tray of icy cocktails. He was trailed by an inscrutably prim parlour-maid with another tray. And then when the few people who asked for tea came over and looked at her rather curiously, she was aware, even in her confused concentration, that Hugo Dereham stepped quickly near the table too, and introduced them. He did not say, "My secretary," but just "Miss May." It was "Miss May, Lady Kent. Captain Western, Miss May," and so on. When she dared to look up she thought she caught an interrogatory gleam in their eyes as they rested on her, and little smiles of kindness or amusement, and on more than one woman's face a hint of patronage penetrated to her. She had no idea how young and slight and incongruous she looked in that great room in her rather crumpled orange linen, which had been the worst possible choice for railway travelling—only the day was hot and the frock was pretty, and railway travelling was unusual and savoured of vague adventures. When she had time to pour herself out a cup of tea and sip

it, she felt better, and she tried to carry off this unexpected situation with business-like voice and dignity. There were so many impressions to receive that it did not occur to her to notice that not one person apparently asked Hugo Dereham, " Who is she ? " As a matter of fact, although she did not yet know it, he was not the man of whom even the closest of friends asked any kind of curious or impertinent question, and he had such a way of making such introductions as he made to her, that those people who came to the tea-table, said to themselves, " I wonder," and no more. One or two men came over to her, and stayed to talk a little, but she only wished that they would not. When they said, " Did you go to the polo yesterday ? " she had to say, " No." And when they said, " Are you going to the Eton and Harrow, or are you bored ? " she had to say " No," too. When they said, " Have you seen John Seagull's new play ? " that again was " No." And even when they asked, " Do you dance much ? " she was obliged to answer very, very reluctantly, " No."

" Here *is* Seagull," said the man who had asked her the question about the actor, and that famous face she had seen earlier in the day at the Savoy came into the room. Dereham brought him over and introduced him to her at once. " That is kind of Sir Hugo," she thought tremulously, " but I wish he wouldn't. I don't know what to talk about."

The great man was no trouble at all. He sat down close to her, chose tea instead of a cocktail, and assured her :

" It is a great pleasure to meet you. I saw you at the Savoy at luncheon."

When she looked amazed, he added, laughing :

" Of course I did. Haven't I eyes ? " And he said very kindly and curiously, " You are a very young little young lady ; when did you come to town ? " And when

she told him: "To-day," he whispered in a voice that was just between themselves, "The first time?" And she begged, dismayed, "Does that show?" and he replied, "Only to me. The others won't know."

Then Dereham came up, and said in his eternally sardonic voice:

"Now, John! Now, John!"

What did they mean?

Then with a smile and the most graceful gesture of adieu, the famous man left her to go and talk to a dowager who was sitting looking thoughtful all alone. That, she thought, was the most extraordinary part of this afternoon. There were rather stuffy-looking great ladies—something about their whole carriage, their serene faces, their careless, good, undecorative clothes told her that they were women of importance—and there were beautifully painted young women, entirely masked by paint, with voices like tin triumpets. There were men with clever faces, young and old, but the painted young women with their suitable escorts were in the majority, and they all called Hugo Dereham "Darling," and "Duck," and "Precious," and "Sweet," whereas the dowagers and old men just said "Hugo," rather affectionately, as if they had perhaps known him from boyhood. Then quite suddenly into the stream of arrivals and departures, there walked one woman who, for some reason she could not fathom, arrested Sonia's attention, and stood out clearly from all the others. She made an effective entry, all in grey; a dress up to the throat, down to her thin ankles, with long, tight sleeves almost covering her thin hands. She wore a little yellow hat pulled right down over one eyebrow. She was older than some of the alluring young women, perhaps thirty. She had a clear, hard face, and bright eyes. It seemed almost as if people moved to make a path for her down the centre of the room, and she came in very confidently,

going straight to Hugo Dereham, and asking with the quick, sure solicitude of rather a particular friend:

"How are you to-day, darling?"

Had Sonia heard Hugo Dereham called "darling" the first time that afternoon, her mind would at once have assumed romance, but by this time he had been "pet" and "sweetheart" to so many of these well-groomed laughing women, that she was by now aware, of course, that such an address carried with it no particular meaning. Yet there was about this woman something rather apart from the rest, and so Sonia was faintly conscious of thinking, "Oh, I hope that he wouldn't . . ." But she broke the thought off. What did it matter to her what Sir Hugo Dereham did with his private life? And, anyway, he himself seemed just as hard, just as sardonic, as any of them. All the time that they gathered round him, she had seen those straight, light eyes of his, criticising mercilessly. She was sure that he was very critical. The newcomer had put out both her hands to him, and so he had taken them, and she was still holding fast to both his hands in the middle of the room, creating subtly a sort of isolation for them both, and she was still talking to him, inquiring minutely about his health, and what he had done that day, and what he was going to do that evening, and whether he was obeying doctor's orders, when, somehow, although her attention appeared to be fixed altogether on him, she seemed to become aware of the crumpled orange frock, which sat looking so withdrawn from all of them, behind the big tea-table.

In the noise of voices, Sonia could not hear her ask, "Who is that, Hugo?" but she knew that the question had been asked, rather quickly and sharply, and she saw Hugo Dereham smiling into this woman's eyes

His smile was not kind, it was light, amused, and a little challenging.

"Come and see," he might have said, Sonia thought, but, anyway, he was bringing this woman in grey, whom of all people in that room she suddenly felt she shrank from meeting, towards her.

"Miss May, Miss Ramonde Allett." Again he refrained from mentioning that Sonia was his secretary. They said a particularly formal, "How do you do," and in Ramonde Allett's eyes was something like fury, breathless surprise, which Hugo Dereham, standing beside her, explained in a voice that was very courteous, but with a subtle pleasure underneath its smooth tone:

"Miss Allett," he said to Sonia, "usually takes on those arduous duties that you are kindly performing for me this afternoon. I expect she is quite glad to be let off."

But in Ramonde Allett's eyes and her whole offended, derisive bearing, Sonia was wise enough already to read more than mere annoyance at this business of presiding being taken from her.

What she could not yet know was that Ramonde Allett had made herself almost, as it were, a self-imposed hostess in that house for months past, coming and going at all times, and saying "You must be looked after, dear Hugo," or "Look here, Pet, I'll see to that for you," or "I won't have you over-tiring yourself, my dear." Her whole attitude becoming a little more proprietary every day.

Had Sonia known that, she would have understood why people appeared to give the effect of standing back a little from Ramonde and Hugo as they met, and why people had the air of assuming that Ramonde had a special niche in that house.

Then Ramonde Allett answered tardily.

"I know I am a little late," she drawled, and she smiled, while her hard unfriendly eyes stared at Sonia; "but I am glad you have found a deputy, Hugo, darling. Is she a good deputy, or shall I take over?"

"She is a very good deputy indeed," Dereham replied, and then he put his hand in Ramonde Allett's thin arm, turned her away from the table, and led her away to a vivid crowd on the flower banked hearth. Sonia sat all alone for a few moments, conscious that several people had paused in their talk, and watched the little scene, and now eyed her rather curiously. She felt at tension, but then John Seagull left the elderly woman he was talking to, and again came over to her. He gave a little oblique glance that indicated Ramonde Allett over by the hearth, without letting his eyes rest actually upon her, and he turned to Sonia with a delightful air of conspiracy.

"*Touché*," he said in a low voice, and she knew that he meant Miss Allett, and that he was not sorry at her discomfiture. Sonia was very sorry indeed. She would not for the world have invaded any one's rights, and all the small scene privately distressed her.

But she smiled back at Seagull, and confided in him. "I don't really quite understand things here, you know."

"Why should you, my dear?" he asked soothingly. "Who are you? Tell me about yourself. Why hasn't one seen you before?"

To which she replied very simply, "Why should you, Mr. Seagull? I am nobody, you see. I came up from Devonshire this morning to be Sir Hugo's secretary."

He looked extremely surprised at that, laughed, and murmured something which sounded like, "How nice for Hugo." Then he made her a little bow, and moved away. Apparently curiosity was satisfied. Again she was left trying to sum up these new conditions. Many times, during what seemed to her those two long hours that she sat at the tea-table, she met Ramonde Allett's eyes fixed upon her in their hostile, contemptuous stare, and it made her uneasy. She wanted to go to Sir Hugo

and say, "Can't I go home now?" Home being that ladies' residential club, but although she felt an interloper, she never quite summed up the courage to rise and cross the room, and attract his attention; to interrupt his casual conversation with this or that person.

So that it was an immense relief to her when, a quarter of an hour before the last guests drifted away, and while Ramonde Allett was still in the room, Selwinn walked in.

He was already in dinner clothes. By now, servants were removing tea things, and a final tray of cocktails was being handed round. She had just thought, "Surely I can soon escape," when she met Selwinn's smiling eyes. They seemed so frank and kind and friendly compared with these rather supercilious, noisy people about her, or compared with Ramonde Allett or even Sir Hugo himself. Selwinn paused to say some courtier's words to Ramonde, nodded to Hugo, and then came straight over to her.

"Well?" he asked. He sat down on the arm of a chair. She could not think of anything to say but:

"How nice to see you again so soon."

"I was thinking the same thing," he returned in his light voice. "How are things going?"

She murmured that she hoped that, as far as she was concerned, "things" were going quite well and satisfactorily. But she confided in him too.

"The afternoon has been an ordeal. There is a lady here, Miss Allett, who sometimes pours out tea, doesn't she?"

"I wouldn't say sometimes," he retorted. "I'd say always. Whenever she's here, and has the chance," he went on under his breath.

"I do wish," Sonia breathed, "that Sir Hugo hadn't asked me to do it. I feel as if I'm presuming."

"Who made you feel like that?" Selwinn asked; shrewdly answering himself. "I know pretty well. It was Ramonde. She is great at that peculiar art. Well, poor child, you will soon be released now. And how is the ladies' hostel?"

She said that, as far as she had seen, it was quite nice enough.

"Until you can get something nicer," he said; "but nearly all working girls live in these grim places, don't they?"

She had no idea of how or where working girls lived, and realised it.

"I don't know. Do they? You see, I hadn't been to London before."

"Oh, yes," he answered, "I have known dozens of them."

A momentary smile flickered in his eyes as he recalled various little eager hearted typists and sales girls, who had caught his eye, and whom he had sometimes taken out for a run and dinner in the country, or for dinner in town at some place where he would not meet any of his own friends, with a musical show afterwards. He had always called for them at just such places as that where Sonia May was now staying, because, wisely enough, he never took out on those pleasure expeditions, any such girls who were living at home, complicated by parents. Following the lightning recollection, came a brief wonder as to whether Sonia herself would not make a very charming companion one evening.

"I dare say," he said, "that the place is all right, and I expect you girls look upon it as sort of bachelor chambers. After all, girls have got to live somewhere, haven't they?"

Then he got up, because Ramonde was looking at him imperiously. She was about to leave, and objected to the fact that any man of her acquaintance should not

be instantly on his feet to take farewell, especially Hugo's cousin, who really should not be such a fool as to fuss over that girl whom nobody knew, in the presence of his own kind.

"Well, Ramonde," he said, while Hugo stood by still smiling his dark smile, "you are looking very lovely, and I like the angle of the hat."

"Shall I see you to-night at the Davenports'?" she asked.

"No, I am going to dine quietly here with old Hugo."

He looked affectionately at his cousin.

"And the country maiden?" said Ramonde with a slight sneer.

"Oh, the country maiden is going home. She's just told me so." For a moment he reflected carefully, noting that Ramonde seemed to have no inkling of this Sonia May's position, and wondering why. He went on: "It's been a perfectly terrifying afternoon for her. Hugo has victimised the child. It's his brutality." He did not add, "I mitigated all that with a damn good lunch at the Savoy." And he hoped Sonia would have the good sense to remember his instructions and to say nothing either.

"I'm sorry," said Hugo briefly, and sardonically.

His look said to Ramonde, who knew his looks: "I'm tired of everything. Get along." In fact, he actually said to her aloud: "You've got a home of sorts too, haven't you?"

She managed her laugh somehow.

"Well, good-bye, Francis," she said, "as I can't drop you anywhere I'll be off."

And she moved beside Hugo Dereham to the door.

Sonia was conscious of a shamefully childish relief when that grey frock and yellow hat finally disappeared. She looked up stealthily and saw that Selwinn still stood

on the flower-banked hearth surveying her, and straightening his tie. He looked extraordinarily handsome and well groomed, in the kind of easy natural way that showed perfect grooming was his habit. He seemed to her like a port in a storm, or a kindly raft in this sea in which she certainly felt more than a little like a shipwrecked mariner.

"You are being let off soon," he assured her.

She rose, straightening out the creases of the orange frock. She felt herself in comparison with the brilliant butterflies she had just seen, to be hopelessly ill-dressed, but some fighting spirit rose in her, and she gritted her teeth together on the thought: "I've got to hold this job; I've got to keep it. The five pounds a week is simply a tremendous salary for a beginner."

It was actually in her mind at this moment what a tremendous relief a quarter's savings, for save she would, should mean to those two darlings who already seemed so far away in Lulham. With a quarter's savings she would be able to pay a considerable portion of the overdue interest on the mortgage on the cottage. But even while she stood for a moment thinking this, she knew that the solving of their difficulties really fell entirely upon herself, for the two darlings' horror-stricken surprise if such a black day should dawn would only result in their wandering, confidently as babies, hand in hand, out into the vague world beyond their garden gate. They would still trust in the fairies.

That was the most worrying and exasperating part of it all.

"Tell me," she begged Selwinn, "ought I, that is to say, was there some way in which I could have given up the tea-table to Miss Allett?"

"Oh, rot!" he answered, "I was jolly glad to see you there, and as for Ramonde, she can look after herself. You can trust her always to give a bit more than

she gets, if there's any question of a rumpus. You look out for yourself, my child," he said good-humouredly and with a little caress in his voice.

Dereham came back into the pastel room.

He looked at them both keenly for a moment.

"Well, Francis," he said, "sorry to cause you to change so early, but "—and he looked towards Sonia as if explaining matters to her—" we'll dine at seven-thirty and I shall go off to bed pretty soon, if I am going to work well to-morrow. I'll just go and change, myself, now." He addressed Sonia in direct dismissal. "Thank you so much, Miss May, you have been most helpful to me."

He was a most uncompromising man.

Again she was nervous before the sardonic gleam in his eyes.

"Will you be here at ten to-morrow, if you please? I hope you are comfortable in your "—he paused—" wherever it is you are staying."

"Oh, yes, thank you, Sir Hugo. Good evening." But from the door to which he had followed her perfunctorily, just sketching the courtesy, he called: "I had better know where you are, Miss May, and your telephone number."

"Oh, of course, Sir Hugo."

Her hands were still a little tremulous as she fished in her vanity bag for her notebook and pencil, and wrote the address and the telephone number, and tore the leaf out and handed it to him.

"You have been pouring out tea too long," he said, watching her hands.

It was unkind of him. Unkind!

"Not a bit," she murmured, and then she managed to escape and, the front door shut behind her, to breathe freely. "The ice has been broken," she thought. "So far, so good."

In the house she had left, the two men looked at each other, but only Selwinn laughed.

"Yes, you can laugh," Dereham growled; "but what the hell do you mean by engaging a girl like that?"

"What's wrong with her, Hugo?"

"Nothing from some people's point of view, no doubt, and everything from mine. Look here, Francis, I thought you took it for granted that when I asked you to find me a secretary, I meant a man."

Selwinn's eyebrows went up, but he did no more than simulate surprise, for he knew perfectly well that Hugo Dereham knew that he had known. He had not said in so many words, "Find me a man," but it had been implicitly implied between them.

"My dear Hugo"—he gave a little shrug—"I assure you, a man wouldn't really have suited your book. I thought all round it. A woman can be useful to you in your state of health in a hundred ways, and she'll be softer, more tactful, more sympathetic and patient; it's the nature of things that she should. You too. When your nerves are frayed, a nice tactful, clever girl won't fray them any more, as nearly any fellow you might engage for the job would be bound to do. A tip-top male secretary," he urged reasonably, "is hard to find, and even then he may not be exactly what you want, while this girl——" He paused. "Well," he went on, "she knows something about your own subject, and it seemed to me that that was distinctly in her favour."

"And you found out all that before you engaged her, did you, Francis?"

Selwinn did not change countenance.

"Certainly," he said promptly, knowing that Hugo, if he did not quite believe him, would treat that as a perfectly excusable male lie. For it was only his sickness which made him unconscionably ill-tempered.

"I agree," he said, "she is far too pretty, Hugo, and even too young. But youth and beauty about a sick man's house can't exactly be considered drawbacks, can they, old man?"

"No," Dereham admitted unwillingly, "I suppose they can't."

"I will confess I didn't know she looked quite like she does. She sent me a most misleading photograph, the little devil! Hair scragged back, a perfectly beastly dress and giglamps. She has explained since that it is the only portrait she had."

"Oh," said Dereham quickly, "when did she explain that? When you were talking to her just now?"

"Exactly," Selwinn answered deftly.

"I was darned surprised to see her when I went into the library expecting to find some nervous boy just down from Cambridge, I can tell you," said Dereham, "and I as nearly as possible told her it had been a mistake. I as nearly as possible wrote her out a cheque for whatever recompense she might consider she was entitled to, and sent her home, wherever home is."

"Ah, old man," said Selwinn encouragingly; "but you didn't quite do it."

"No," admitted Dereham, "I didn't quite do it."

"And why not, Hugo?"

"I'm not quite sure. Perhaps I thought that, as you say, Francis, youth and beauty are no drawbacks in this house. But I wonder if she will stand the pace, because, mind you, I've got to put her through it; she's got to work confoundedly hard if the book's to be finished before I finish."

A silence fell between them. Selwinn put his hand on his cousin's shoulder. He sighed; he found that prospect shocking in spite of his own rosy future. But when he glanced at Dereham, he was making to turn impatiently away.

"Poor old man," said Selwinn soberly.

"Oh, I don't know," said Dereham. "Well, I'll go and dress. We're having dinner in about twenty minutes."

Selwinn remained standing on the hearth. The summer evening had not yet darkened, though the air was cooler than it had been all day. The trees of the square were quite still and made a memorable picture set severally as if framed in the row of high windows that stretched all down one wall of the big room. He looked about him at the precious and beautiful things. Some of them Hugo had himself collected; he was a loving collector; and Selwinn thought of Fennimore, that half-ruined place set on the Welsh border, which, curiously enough, seemed to count so inordinately much to this man who had inherited it unexpectedly, and who would never live there. "Poor chap," Selwinn thought. But then there came the ever-pleasant recollection, and for the life of him he could not help it, that in a very few months at the most, this house and Fennimore, and Hugo's money, or such of it as was not entirely personal, all, in fact, that was trust money—the bulk of it—would be his.

He had no doubts about the value of the pleasures of the world. He knew that for a rich man, life was a treasure-house into which he could dip his hand at will. And his own problems, which really had never troubled him very much, because, as he had told Sonia, his credit still was good, or goodish, had dropped to nothing since Hugo Dereham had told him that within the next six months he would die.

He lit himself a cigarette and rang the bell and spoke amiably to Barton.

"Couldn't I have another cocktail now, Barton?"

He was thinking all the time how lucky it was for him that Hugo had not married. Supposing there had been a son and heir? It was a subject which had never

cropped up between him and Hugo since he had learned of the death sentence, although they had talked pretty carefully about the other aspects of the inheritance. There had been many times in the immediate past when Selwinn had feared Ramonde Allett. She meant to marry Hugo, and who knew but that, in one of his queer humours, Hugo might not think that he would like a son of his own, even a posthumous son? Ramonde had only to have an inkling of how that spiritual land lay in the difficult regions of Hugo Dereham's soul, and she would quicken all her subtlety, all her lure and her charm, of which she had plenty when she cared to use it, to become Lady Dereham—in time. She had been so much in the house, she had helped Hugo so ardently over the collection of material for the book on Fennimore that Selwinn had sensed that danger with almost uncanny intuition.

As matters stood, she didn't know that time limits were now irrevocably measured.

She was playing her own game; and playing carefully and slow—in ignorance.

" Hugo," Selwinn had said, " now that you have told me how it is with you, old man, and now that I know how dead set you are on getting this job of work finished, I'd advise you to let me find you a good secretary. Ramonde is all very well in her amateur way, and of course she is a dear, but a fellow in your fix wants real competence." Dereham had answered, " All right, produce one." Selwinn, on that, did not commit the mistake of taking it entirely for granted. He had, therefore, continued, a day or two later: " I am seeing about the secretary." And then: " I'm investigating the credentials of several likely people." And then: " By the way, I have got that secretary for you. I suppose such and such a day and hour will be all right for you to inspect."

Just then Dereham had had one of his bad and frequent bouts of pain. He had been in the hands of doctors and nurses, and the thing had gone through perfectly easily.

Get a secretary into the house, Selwinn had reasoned within himself, a woman secretary who is going to keep Ramonde out, not a man who will be giving her all the opportunities she wants; and things will feel considerably safer. A woman secretary, he reckoned, could be trusted for a little natural jealousy. Then when he met Sonia May on Paddington Station, after the first startled surprise, he had congratulated himself: "Well, I think things should certainly be considerably safer now if she is up to the work and if only old Hugo doesn't jib at the first sight of her."

Already Selwinn felt at home in this house just as if it were his own, and he stood on the hearth-rug, drinking the cocktail which Barton had brought to him, making his mental notes with satisfaction.

Of course he felt regret for old Hugo, and the sorrow that any decent fellow should feel, and, of course, he looked upon the circumventing of Ramonde almost in the light of a sporting event.

And yet below these exterior feelings, he was quite ashamed to know himself to be capable of pretty deep calculation. But these moments of shame were not many, they did not bite deep; for after all, he was doing no one any harm; and in discovering what he and Hugo had agreed was youth and beauty, why, really, he thought, he had done a poor sick chap a bit of good rather than otherwise.

"I hope you won't miss Ramonde, of course," he suggested, watching Hugo out of the corner of his eye, when he returned to the pastel room.

He met Hugo's ironic look and dissected it. "I have no doubt," he thought to himself, "old Hugo is

quite wise to it all, really. Perhaps it amuses a fellow under sentence of death, to watch all the people playing and plotting around him. They must seem awfully far off." Then he was a little disconcerted by Dereham expressing his thought in simple words.

"Oh, I don't worry much who's here and who isn't. You know, Francis, people seem pretty shadowy to me. Even you seem rather like a shadow. Riding twelve stone, I know," he added, and laughed.

"You've got pluck," Selwinn muttered, "in your shoes, I couldn't laugh."

"Why not ?" said Dereham. "Well, I hope this girl's quick, for time presses. And I hope she's intelligent, for I can't stand fools."

"Ramonde isn't a fool, but she's amateur, and that's as bad," said Selwinn quickly.

Sometimes he almost feared the other man's searching eyes, and he had to meet them now.

"Oh, quite," said Dereham, after a pause, "I'm not complaining at anything you've done, old man. Thanks very much. I'm sure. You seem to have rather a down on Ramonde, though." And for a moment a gleam came into those eyes, expressing, Selwinn thought uncomfortably, secret amusement at mortal antics; secret irony at all mere worldly tacticians.

"On the contrary," he said quickly.

He became aware to his surprise that Hugo Dereham had actually seen through Ramonde's manœuvres.

Far from being a vain man, he must know, after all, that he was extremely eligible, that half the women who fluttered in and out of that house would have liked to be something more than merely friend or acquaintance to "Dear Hugo."

Yes, Hugo knew ! He had seen ! He was an attractive fellow, Selwinn thought, and the slight invalidism which was all that the outside world knew about his state of

health, made him all the more so to more than one type of woman.

But Ramonde was the only real danger. She was thirty, she was desperately poor, and yet strove equally desperately to keep full and greedy hold on all the good things of life, on soft ways and pleasant places, and worth-while people.

It had been so likely that Hugo, with the—so it had seemed, and so it still seemed, to Selwinn, even on the most careful reflection—reckless mental attitude of the doomed, might have said to her—especially as she was old enough to look at a bargain, and chance it: "Ramonde, I shall be a dead man within a year, but I should like an heir. I want a son, and no outsider, to have Fennimore. Will you marry me, and we will both risk it?"

But once oust Ramonde from her self-imposed secretarial work, and Hugo, immersed in his book and his researches for it, would see very little of her indeed. No more quiet hours with just the two of them alone; helpful hours, in which a clever woman like Ramonde Allett could be at her very best; uncompetitive hours, in which he did not see her in company with softer, sweeter women.

"Danger! Danger all along the line!" Selwinn still thought as they stood together friendlily in the quiet room.

Then Barton opened the door and announced dinner.

The cousins were by themselves at that short, excellent dinner, and they talked very little more. The meal became taciturn. Dereham, by his doctor's orders, had to turn in early most nights of the week, or he would shorten that already short span of life which was left to him; and by ten o'clock Selwinn had left him, and he was really alone. He exchanged his dinner clothes for a silk dressing-gown, went back to the library, and, with

all the windows open, sat looking out into the now moonlit courtyard. He felt too fatalistic to be greatly disturbed by any alterations in his life, and he was only faintly surprised and not much annoyed after all, at the personality of his new secretary. What exactly had brought this unusual type of girl right up from her home in the west country to work long days, at what must be, after all, mere routine to the uncreative mind ?

She was tired of a quiet life ?

All women hated a quiet life. All women wanted change, excitement, and both dependence and independence. "That is," he thought, "they want to take all they can get, and then do what they like with it." He discerned easily in women the special revolt in all matters of discipline to which men, who had learned more in harder schools, agreed to submit. He found the female revolt, usually, despicable. Men took the iron of life into their souls and carried it on high ; women would not. Was this little girl also a secret rebel ? She wanted her conception of fun and luxury—and laxity also ? He could see her again sitting at the big tea-table, her nervous hands—and their nervousness had not escaped him—busy with pouring out those innumerable cups of tea.

Perhaps it had been unkind of him ; he had known that Ramonde would inevitably come in, because she had, as it were, established her rights in this house in a way which had caused him caustic amusement even while he demurred to his admiration of her accomplished gestures. But even if Ramonde had not come in—and she had been late—Barton and the parlourmaid were accustomed to do all the necessary serving in a bachelor household.

Why then had he perversely wanted to put this Sonia May immediately to the test ?

The girl in her orange frock seemed to float briefly

across the moonlit garden, and he was smiling. Perhaps she was a calculating minx, studying her opportunities, but—to be as young as that !

It was a miracle.

He confessed to himself that she was quite beautiful, and that many men would think him rather lucky, but beyond the fact that she was a pleasure to the sight, nothing of that should matter to him.

He remembered with inexplicable satisfaction, " I didn't tell Ramonde that she was my secretary."

CHAPTER III

SONIA shut the front door of the ladies' club more confidently behind her the next morning. She had written, last night, a long letter to the two dreamers down in Lulham, picturing all her experiences for them, even the luncheon at the Savoy ; and she had eaten the club dinner in company with the motley number of young women. There were young women tired from offices, or from selling ; young women who were cashiers, canvassers, or secretaries to private people as she was. Some of them took a snatched dinner in a hurry, their eyes sparkling with anticipation of rather more hectic hours later on. Some had nothing to do but to linger over their dinner and gossip, and then go up to their rooms, which were mostly shared by two occupants for economy's sake ; again to talk or sew. She had a room of her own, and she was glad to shut herself into it and to review what seemed to her this funny babel of female life. None of these other young women, so she gathered, looked upon their jobs any more as an adventure. Work was just something to be got through as quickly as possible, praying for the evening hours ; or, for the lucky ones, for the changeful week-ends.

Very soberly she sat down to write that letter, and then suddenly colours and joys and anticipations had returned, and she had penned a detailed account of that day very vividly.

"I shall be able to save at least three pounds a week," she had written, "because I shall probably lunch at Sir Hugo's house. With a good lunch I shan't want any dinner, shall I? Oh, I shall see you safely through your troubles, darlings! You do believe me now, don't you?" and she had added that her father's notes on Fennimore would be simply invaluable. Sir Hugo had been quite interested, although not as interested as his cousin, Mr. Selwinn.

She thought of them this morning, receiving the letter, being glad for her, being thankful for themselves and the cottage, in spite of the fact that they had never recognised, and always refused to own, that danger was very near. She was still thinking of them, her two dear ones, when she came to the big house in Hilton Square; where Barton let her in with a special smile for her youth and beauty. He handed her a latch-key for her use, and beamed upon her. She went at once, most business-like, to the library, arranged her pad and pencils, and notes, and sat waiting. Dereham kept her for half an hour, making her nervous, before he came in with apologies; and in spite of the apologies she was afraid all over again of this tall, dark arrogant man, with his light eyes that seemed to miss nothing; she was afraid of his ironic intonation of voice; of the way his mind worked, and the certainty of his dictation when she herself was inwardly all uncertainties; though mixed with this fear were pride and resolution and not a little defiance to help her. She was also childishly afraid that he would seek out her weak points; and her resolution was to hide them. She would show him that she, little young Sonia May, was perfectly capable of doing what,

even in her inexperience, she now guessed to be a difficult and exacting secretarial job. It was not like anything that she had been used to do. Taking down the vicar's sermons that time when he had hurt his hand was a bagatelle. The vicar's thoughts came slowly and were phrased even more slowly, although his after-thoughts had complicated matters, and exercised her intelligence. He had rambled up and down his shabby study, pausing to call out some order to the gardener's boy outside, or being interrupted by his wife with a domestic problem. Time had not mattered there. But this man sat in the swivel-chair at his big writing-table dictating fast, and hardly pausing to refer to the methodical piles of what appeared to be notes and data of all kinds, all arranged before him, she supposed, by his own sure hands. She did not know that Ramonde Allett had helped to arrange those piles of notes, had searched out with him much of the data that he had collected about his ancient property. She only thought what a complete mastery he seemed to have over what he intended to do, and how slight her part in the work seemed, exacting as it was, compared with his own preparations for it. But she managed by a great effort to keep up with him, apparently unflurried.

She had not time for any extraneous thought, but the man had time, and the sun, pouring into the window, shone full on her bent head. In Lulham, hats were worn seldom, and her mass of golden brown hair had grown thick in the open air and had been gilded by twenty-one summer suns. Hugo Dereham thought, "What marvellous hair! I should like to touch it." And had she looked up, which she did not in all that long tense hour, she would have seen him smile sarcastically at himself. "Of course I want to touch it," he thought. "What man wouldn't? Why am I a fool?" But he continued to enjoy seeing that hair pushed back off a

white forehead, pushed behind small ears into a great bush on the nape of her neck. It waved and curled incorrigibly.

He had a silly thought for so arrogant a man: "How her mother must love her!"

At the end of an hour he was actually glad to say: "Well, that's all for this morning, Miss May. I hope your typing is as speedy as your shorthand, and then you will get that lot done to-day, won't you? I expect Barton has shown you that you have a little room at the back of the hall?"

"He hasn't," she said; "but I'll find it, thank you."

"I'll show you."

He thought: "I'll have at Francis again about this! The brute must know the girl's distracting," as he got up and opened the door for her. She hoped that he would not always be so polite, because she felt sure that employers remained seated and absorbed, while secretaries just came and went before them. He was ushering her now across the hall. There was a little room with a window of opaque glass that opened on to a mere blank wall. It was severely practical and uninteresting, with table, typewriter, and one or two chairs.

"Nothing to disturb you here, is there?" he said, surveying it. No, there was nothing to disturb her there. With a small sigh for the lovely vista of the garden, she thanked him. The door closed upon her. "Well," she gasped to herself, "I've begun, and begun well." She had neither faltered nor fidgeted. No one, however experienced, could have taken dictation better, she thought, and she sat elated and happy. She commenced to type. Ten sheets had been laid aside, and she was inserting two more sheets and the carbon carefully into the machine, when the door was suddenly flung open. A light wind from the open window rustled the sheets of paper, and she laid her hand upon them quickly before

turning to see who was there. Then looking up, she saw Ramonde Allett, very cool in the latest mode in linen; but her eyes were not cool; they glittered. Sonia did not know that her own gesture, involuntarily holding down the typewritten sheets, looked to the other woman like a gesture of defence against her, and before she had time to say, "Good-morning," Ramonde had stepped forward and slammed the door shut. Sonia rose, still with her finger-tips on the paper, and asked in what she considered to be the best business-like secretarial manner.

"Do you wish to see Sir Hugo, Miss Allett?"

Ramonde gave an incredulous little breathless laugh, but her eyes were not laughing.

"Oh, Miss May," she said, as if remembering the name with difficulty, "what are you doing here?"

"My work, Miss Allett," Sonia smiled, but sensing the tension.

"What work?" Ramonde asked.

It was a crude demand.

"I am Sir Hugo's new secretary, Miss Allett."

"His secretary?" Ramonde repeated slowly.

"I arrived yesterday," Sonia said. "We met at tea."

"Did we?" said Ramonde in an indescribably insolent voice.

Sonia did not know that this insolence was a mere expression of Ramonde's anger, and she stiffened haughtily. And Ramonde did not miss that involuntary haughtiness. She glanced down at the typewritten pages.

"What work are you doing?" she asked.

"Sir Hugo's book," Sonia said coldly.

Ramonde caught up the loose sheets from beneath the light hold of Sonia's finger-tips, tore them across and across, and flung them down.

CHAPTER IV

FOR a long moment Sonia stood staring at Ramonde Allett and not a word was spoken on either side. Then suddenly the door opened and Dereham stood looking in. His eyes instantly assessed the scene, Sonia's incredulous amazement and Ramonde's unreined temper.

It was Sonia who lifted her eyes to him first, and her look that made Ramonde turn swiftly round. She had been too possessed with her anger to hear the quiet opening of the door.

" Ah, Hugo ! " she exclaimed, her voice all false notes, uncontrolled.

There was a little pause before he greeted her, during which his eyes went questioningly to the torn paper strewn on the floor. And Ramonde began to flush a dusky and not very becoming red all over her smooth face.

" Good-morning, Ramonde," he said easily. " Batton has just told me that you had arrived and gone straight to the 'office.' I am so sorry I didn't telephone you about my arrangements, but I had no idea you were coming in this morning."

" I always come in, Hugo."

" Not always," he corrected her. " It might have been a dressmaker's morning. Sometimes it is."

But she said, still flurried : " That doesn't happen often, Hugo."

" Anyway," he said, " you will accept my apology."

" My dear, of course." Still she stood, uncertain.

" And it looks," he added, " as if Miss May would need to hear something like that from you. Did you really tear up all that work ? "

There was a silence.

" I can't conceive that she did it," he said in his easy sardonic voice, and then Ramonde began :

" Oh," and stopped. " Oh," and paused again.

Sonia suddenly turned from anger at her, to that same slight resentment she had felt against Dereham at odd moments yesterday, for there they stood before him, the woman of the world, and herself, like two schoolgirls, one innocent, the other guilty, one the accused, the other the accuser.

" And I'm not going to accuse her," she thought, prompted by some dim memory of school-girlish honour, " I haven't told him that she tore it up."

Standing a little away from them both behind her typewriter where she had moved, she seemed to see him even rather amused at feminine tantrums ; not kindly amused, but deeply and sardonically, and even bitterly. In a rush of generosity, she was sorry for this insolent Miss Allett.

Ramonde mastered herself even to mastering that flush. She grew cool, and composed, although her effect of laughing at herself was not successful.

" Well, Hugo," she said, and became soft and appealing in a way that amazed Sonia, although Dereham seemed to watch these changes as an unkindly and unsurprised spectator, " you really should have telephoned me. Naturally, I had no idea that you didn't want my help any longer. How should I have known that Miss May is your secretary ? I am sorry that I have messed up her morning's work."

Sonia interrupted : " Oh, don't apologise."

She said this urgently, because she did not want any woman to humble herself before this arrogant man.

" But I must apologise," said Ramonde very graciously. " I'm just too, too sorry. I feel that I ought to sit right down at the typewriter and do it all over again."

" But you can't read shorthand," said Dereham unkindly.

" Oh, shorthand," she echoed, " no, of course, I can't. How stupid of me not to realise that you have a *trained* secretary now." She turned to Sonia again. " So I can't even make any amends."

Sonia said quietly :

" I should never allow you to do my work for me, Miss Allett."

She heard Dereham say in a gentle amused voice : " Good," but she did not want him to say or look anything to add to the other woman's discomfiture, although it was wonderful to see how quickly Ramonde could shake off that discomfiture and become her easy self again.

" You ought at least to pick up the pieces," said Dereham, adding, " you little devil ! "

That pleased Ramonde. A spark came into her eyes, and relief into her voice. She did not mind a man calling her " little devil," especially Hugo Dereham. It implied some familiarity ; and intimacy ; and it was just as well that this girl should realise such existed, for the women secretaries of rich and attractive men could make themselves very tiresome to intruders.

" Oh, Hugo," she said, soft and appealing, " hadn't Barton better come and do it, and Miss May can be left to her work ? " As she spoke, she moved forward and pressed the bell.

" I can pick it up," Sonia was saying, because she wanted to be left alone, and the whole thing seemed to her the height of ill-manners.

" Not at all," said Dereham. " Barton, will you just have this litter cleared away as soon as possible, so that Miss May need not be further disturbed."

Sonia sat down again before her typewriter, drew her shorthand notes to her, and recommenced the chapter.

"Good," Dereham commended her again, looking back over his shoulder as he ushered Ramonde out, but she did not so much as lift her eyes until she heard the door shut behind Barton also.

Then she was surprised to find herself quite tremulous. It had been a nervous time—that five minutes with that angry woman who perhaps was a little justified in her anger if not in her manners.

"But," Sonia thought briefly, "the people up here are not like the people in Lulham."

In five minutes, the door opened quietly again, and Dereham once more came in. He stood near her table.

"All right?" he asked.

"Perfectly all right, thank you," she answered briefly.

"That won't occur again," he said, "and it was my fault. I ought to have let Miss Allett know this morning. I should have done if"—he paused—"well, if my new secretary had been what I expected."

He had better not tell this girl that, since he saw her yesterday, some demon of irritable mischief had prompted him to think that it would be fun to present her suddenly to Ramonde. The affair of the tea table yesterday had disappointed the demon, for Ramonde had merely taken the newcomer for some guest hitherto not met by herself, who, perhaps by virtue of being the youngest and most innocent in the room, had been asked to pour out tea, just as one might say to a child, "Now you can have a treat, dear, and pour out."

Since Ramonde had dismissed yesterday's incident, he had looked forward just a little to the slight amusement of confronting her with the change this morning.

But now, after all, he was ashamed of this petty unkindness, of the demon which seemed to drive him, which made him find entertainment in collecting a crowd of superficial, flattering people, listening to their pleasant lies, watching the insignificant dramas which

they were always staging about themselves, as if they imagined that they cut any real figure in the real world of love and passion, pain and sorrow, danger and death, sacrifice and heroism.

The same demon had let him put this girl to a stupid test, such as she had just come through, flyingly.

"You are a bit shaky," he said abruptly; "you mustn't let a little thing like that make you unhappy, child."

Her fingers ceased their typing, and she looked up at him.

"That would not make me unhappy."

"Well, what did make you unhappy then?"

"I wasn't unhappy."

"You were."

She herself was conscious of a resolute reserve. She knew, of course, that she had been very unhappy for those five minutes, and suddenly she knew exactly why. It was not because of Ramonde. What did that hard-voiced butterfly of a woman matter? It was because of Dereham, because of that streak of unkindness that seemed to run through his words and looks and actions, like a discordant *motif* in the song of joy that was life. She had seen yesterday that he did not care for any of the people round, except perhaps for his cousin, Francis Selwinn, and, of course, for Ramonde; but, if he did care for Ramonde, why did he try to hurt her? Should not one be kindest, gentlest, and most generous to the person one loves? She thought of her own father and mother, and how never in her life had she ever heard either say a hurtful word to the other.

Again, Lulham is different.

"Well," he persisted, "what were you unhappy about then?"

"No," she said, "please! I would rather not talk about it. This is all so strange to me, you know."

"It might be stranger than you think."

That was surely a mysterious thing to say?

"All these people I have seen here have been so new to me. Please give me a little time."

He looked at her more gently, and after a long pause, he made amends!

"You are quite right. I am sorry. You shall have all the time there is."

He went to the door again.

"Miss May," he said, "all the time there is might be extraordinarily little."

The door closed behind him. She did not stop to wonder exactly what he meant, this extraordinary and rather alarming man, but worked on without stopping until she had re-typed all that Ramonde had destroyed.

Then she saw that Barton must have come in noiselessly, for on the small side-table near the door was a luncheon tray, containing very delicate things.

On the tray was a little note. She opened it and saw that it was headed with an address she did not know, and that a line had been drawn through it. She was not sufficiently versed yet to know that it was the address of Partner, the famous dressmaker. The note was from Ramonde.

"DEAR MISS MAY,—I can't tell you how really sorry I am to have upset you this morning, and to have caused you all that unnecessary trouble. I was feeling a little on edge. Do, like a dear, nice girl, have tea with me this afternoon at five, at my flat, Number 1 Whitehouse Mews. I shall be alone, and shall be disappointed if you do not come.

"Yours very sincerely,
"RAMONDE ALLETT."

She was a dear! An apology like that would make amends for far more than she had done this morning, and Sonia's heart went out to her. It was sweet of a

woman of the world, who must have so many entertaining things to do, to find time, instantly, like this, for such a girl as herself. She looked at the heading of the notepaper again. It was indicated that an answer telephoned there would be no use, because Ramonde had crossed out not only the address but the telephone number. She felt that she could not say no; that it was incumbent upon her to go.

Possibly Ramonde Allett intended to be her friend.

When she had lunched and finished her work, she put on her hat again and went out into the hall. No instructions had been left for her as to whether Dereham required any more work to be done that day, and she supposed that she must find him, or at least ask if he were in or out, but just as she was looking for a bell to summon the butler, Dereham himself came out of his library.

"Finished?" he said.

"I've finished all that we did this morning, Sir Hugo, and I was just coming to ask you if you wanted me any more to-day."

"No," he said. "The hours, as I told you, are irregular. To-day is easy, to-morrow may be damned hard. You will have to take it as it comes, but for to-day, run along." Then he said quickly, "No, please, wait a moment." And then as quickly he contradicted: "Oh, no, don't wait a moment." And he smiled as if half at her, and half at himself, and turned away. He had been going to ask her if she would not dine with him to-night quietly here. There were days when, for some hours together, he swept his house clear of people as it were, would be troubled by no one. This afternoon and evening were such a time, and it had come upon him suddenly that he would have liked the companionship of this girl to-night. "Another day," he was thinking, "another day. Mustn't spoil her for work." And work,

and plenty of it was what he wanted from her first and last, was it not?

She did not guess what had been in Hugo Dereham's mind as she went out into Hilton Square. There was a pleasant activity there. One of the big houses was having an afternoon party, and smooth cars glided by, and silk hats and precious frocks showed against the background of trees and flowers that the square provided. She went on round the corner and turned into her own street, a long street which grew gradually a little shabbier and poorer towards the end where the ladies' residential club was situated. There were no flowers here, no window-boxes.

The club was very quiet. All workers were out, and as she went up to her room and changed her frock for the visit to Ramonde Allett, the manageress emerged from a little sanctum to give her one of those examining looks to which, for their first two weeks, she treated all new-comers.

"A nice day?" she asked encouragingly, and she added pleasantly though with that examining look, "Let me see, I don't think you have told me exactly what your work is."

"Why should I?" thought Sonia, but she answered politely, "I am private secretary to Sir Hugo Dereham."

"Oh, but that's very nice," the manageress exclaimed. "I am always very interested in all the young ladies who come here."

"Will you tell me how to get to Whitehouse Mews?" Sonia said.

It seemed that Whitehouse Mews was not very far away, and it was a most surprising place to her in this city of contradiction, for within a half-mile radius were Hilton Square, her own shabby street, and now, through a narrow entrance off another side-street, where you would never expect to find any one who mattered, was

Whitehouse Mews, grimy to behold, busy with chauffeurs and garage hands; echoing spasmodically with the metallic sound of eternal repair work.

Ramonde had a flat right at the end, looking straight down the whole *cul-de-sac*, and this was the most surprising thing there, for her few window frames, and front door, and the garage doors beneath, behind which was her own shabby little car, were painted a brilliant lacquer red, her door knocker was a brass gargoyle, and Ramonde herself answered the knock.

"Sweet of you to come, Miss May," she said, and led the way up a very narrow short stair to the sitting-room over her garage. There was very little furniture in this room, and very few flowers. It expressed no personality at all.

"Funny little dive, isn't it?" said Ramonde good humouredly. "Sit in the one comfortable chair, Miss May, do, and look out upon life while I make tea. You might not think much happens outside that window, but all these yards are a world of their own."

"Let me help you," Sonia said quickly, but Ramonde refused.

She went out, explaining, still surprisingly, over her shoulder that she only had a daily maid, and this was her free afternoon. Very soon she was back with iced tea in tall glasses, and some dry and tiny sandwiches.

"I hope you prefer iced tea to hot tea," she said in her incisive voice. "You see my maid leaves it all ready in the refrigerator, and it saves me a lot of bother."

"I like it very much," said Sonia, who had not tasted, seen, or heard of it before. Ramonde handed a cigarette box.

"You don't smoke? No?"

"No, thank you."

"Tell me all about yourself," said Ramonde, sitting down.

"There would be so little to tell," said Sonia rather blankly. She looked candidly at Ramonde, thinking: "In Lulham we should think it rude to be inquisitive." But she did not know that her eyes expressed the thought.

Ramonde laughed.

"Ah, well, happy is the nation," she said idly. "How do you get on with Hugo Dereham? At least you can tell me that, because you see he is such a very dear friend of mine that what concerns him, really concerns me too."

"I don't see it," Sonia thought, but aloud she answered: "This was my first morning of working for Sir Hugo, and, anyway, I am sure secretaries shouldn't talk."

"Oh, but that's ever such nonsense," Ramonde said, "between we three. You must let me count you already as one of my friends, please, Miss May. After all, one easily sees that you are a gentlewoman, and in a way"—her lip curled slightly—"we can trust each other."

"It's very kind of you to say these things," Sonia said guardedly sipping her iced tea, and liking it.

"Perhaps after all," Ramonde considered, "I can tell you more about Hugo Dereham than you can tell me. You will find him ever so difficult to work for, my dear, and I do want you to feel that you can come to me whenever things get a little too complicated for you. You see, since he came home from the tropics, his health has really been wretched. He has had a lot of malaria, and believe me, nothing makes a man so ill-tempered. I know. My father commanded one of the Indian regiments."

"I should hate to trouble you," said Sonia, still guardedly.

"But it would not be any trouble at all. I feel it's almost my duty to go on helping dear Hugo with his

book. I can't think what on earth made him look for a secretary without consulting me."

"I think Mr. Selwinn looked for him."

"Francis Selwinn?" Ramonde echoed, with almost the same gleam in her eyes that had been there this morning when she tore up ten sheets of careful typing. "But it's no business of his."

"He's very fond of Sir Hugo," Sonia suggested.

Ramonde lighted a cigarette. It was very fragrant and expensive, and came from a green box that looked like malachite.

"So it was Francis Selwinn," she said after a little while. "Oh, well, perhaps he thought dear old Hugo needed some one who could fit in with all his hours. I am sure you will do that, I am sure you will be splendid. After all, my life is such a rush that I can't be expected to do quite as you would, can I? Perhaps Francis is right. You will help the working part of Hugo's life, and I must see what I can do about the other side. He allows himself too little pleasure, dear old Hugo."

"If he's not strong——" said Sonia.

"Oh, it's not only that. He takes life rather grimly, you know. He is used to doing quite a lot of good here and there, or so Francis tell me."

She was being extremely nice to this girl from the country. She was treating her exactly as an equal, taking care not to say "Sir" Hugo, or "Mr." Selwinn to her, but using their first names. She had hoped that the girl would quickly melt and respond to what was surely this flattering treatment, but she seemed cool, careful, and to have a mind and will of her own, as if she had already come to a decision not to talk about Hugo Dereham's affairs, not to enlighten Ramonde on anything that went on behind the library door.

Ramonde, who was clever at guessing, guessed this.

"Well," she said, "you know now that I am only too anxious to help you all I can, because having worked with Hugo so much myself, I do understand him, and he needs understanding. I suppose a good secretary counts herself merely as a machine."

"Perhaps, but I hadn't thought about it," Sonia said quite simply and courteously.

"I did such a lot of work with him," Ramonde repeated.

Even Lulham young people were modern minded enough to form opinions in the quick, cool way that has come to their generation, and while she sipped her tea, Sonia considered Ramonde's claim to have done "such a lot of work with Hugo" and repudiated it. She had not seen, this morning, evidences of such a lot of work. She had seen scraps of notes and lists, and some very badly typed material, from part of which Hugo Dereham had dictated to her; but most of the work of any real use or worth had been in his curiously distinct, resolute hand. So all she said in reply to this was, simply and courteously:

"Sir Hugo must be very grateful to you."

"Oh, gratitude hardly comes into things between us." Ramonde smiled. "After all, when people are so close——" She broke off and said, "But don't let me get confidential, child."

"There is nothing she would like better," Sonia thought to herself, again with the quick, cool inside of modern girlhood.

"You know what I mean," said Ramonde, and a little silence fell between them. Ramonde said:

"Now tell me what you think of my flat."

"It's very interesting."

"Ah, but what do you mean by interesting?" said Ramonde gaily. "I dare say it seems to you very queer and uncomfortable."

"And not a bit like home," Sonia finished for her frankly.

"A home," Ramonde repeated, and sighed. Again she considered Sonia to observe the effect of that sigh. "Home! Well, I shall be glad when I have a real one." Then she said, "Hugo's house is a perfect home, don't you think?"

"Yes," said Sonia. Even then Ramonde was not sure that she had created her effect.

"Come and see my bedroom," she said.

They went into a narrow room which was strange to Sonia, so small, with the shrouded window looking upon the backs of dreary little houses, with a divan for a bed, and masses of silk pillows, and one wall that seemed all mirror and nothing else.

"The bath is here," said Ramonde, pulling aside a silk curtain and showing a small space almost filled with a large, low bath of green marble, and a long shelf which evidently did duty for a dressing-table from the array of bottles and powder-bowls upon it.

"And my clothes are here," she continued, opening a big dark cupboard in the tiny hall. "Most of my friends rather admire the way I have squeezed in."

Sonia could not be blind to the fact that what seemed to her to be these most undesirable premises, had yet had an incongruous amount of money spent upon them.

"You have been awfully clever," she said.

There was no dining-room.

"I dine out a lot," said Ramonde, "in fact, I go out a great deal altogether, so one really doesn't want more."

"I should want a garden," said Sonia.

"Oh, but then one goes away a great deal in the week-ends."

"I shouldn't want to have to go away from my home to breathe," said Sonia.

"Oh, you funny thing," Ramonde exclaimed; "but haven't you just told me this isn't home?"

The door bell rang.

"Sit down again," said Ramonde, "and finish your tea. I suppose I'd better answer that bell." But it seemed that she debated seriously as to whether she should trouble to answer it or not.

"I'm not expecting anybody worth while," she said, "still, one never knows." So she opened the door, and from the sitting-room, Sonia heard the right, laughing, masculine voice that she knew, and Selwinn followed Ramonde in.

"Why," he said, stopping, surprised, "our secretary. And how have you got on to-day, Miss May?"

"She's had the hell of a time with Hugo," Ramonde told him quickly.

"Not with Sir Hugo."

"Who has been giving you the hell of a time then?" Selwinn asked.

"I have," again Ramonde answered, but her laugh now made all the unpleasantness of the morning a mere triviality. She was clever with her intonations, and Sonia marvelled innocently that what in Lulham would have been a scandal for a week, could be lightly dropped, dismissed and forgotten. A French clock on the wall chimed a quarter to six.

"I say," said Selwinn, "I came to fetch you, Ramonde. I thought we could use your car since my old thing's in dock, and we could run out into the sweet, pure country."

"I'll think about it," said Ramonde, and she moved over to a corner cabinet. "Let's shake a cocktail. There's plenty of ice."

"For Miss May too?" he asked teasingly.

"I like this delicious tea," said Sonia in haste.

She watched them while they went about this

apparently intricate business of shaking a cocktail. She felt she had learned such a lot about this new world in the space of these few short hours. Here were these two; the man who, yesterday over a restaurant table, had seemed to her to be rich and sophisticated—those were actually the words which her mind had applied to him, and this woman who had come into the Hilton Square drawing-room yesterday afternoon looking so brilliant and perfectly turned out, going about in this tiny, and, to Sonia, sordid flat, fetching ice from the refrigerator in the kitchen, washing glasses which had evidently been left in the miniature sink, squeezing lemons and eking out the gin. All these things seemed irreconcilable.

"Well, have you thought?" Selwinn demanded of Ramonde.

She had thought. While she had been bandying with him jokes and allusions which Sonia May did not understand, while she had been hospitably ransacking her depleted cabinet for the variety of ingredients he called for, and while she had been maintaining an unworried demeanour after what had been a twenty-four hours' of real worry, she had been assessing, and deciding to manage, the situation.

She wanted, knowing that Dereham would be alone and quiet by his doctor's orders, to slip in—"just on the chance of seeing if you were all by yourself, poor Hugo"—to the Hilton Square house and arrange for herself an invitation to a *tête-à-tête* dinner. But after all, it would be as well if she stayed away after this morning's exhibition.

Besides, she was already revolving the germs of an idea about Selwinn and Sonia in her head.

She said lightly:

"I think it would be grand. Certainly I'll drive you, and we'll take this girl too."

"If Miss May will come," said Selwinn after a little pause.

"She will come!" Ramonde cried confidently.

Sonia did not gainsay her. It was all too new; too interesting. . . .

They crowded into the small coupé and set off. Ramonde drove very fast, and soon, it seemed, they were many miles down in the country, turning into spacious, ornamental grounds, and drawing up before a modernised old mansion, the newest country club, as Selwinn told Sonia. She saw dressing-rooms, restaurant, ballroom, hard tennis courts and a swimming pool so classically conceived and so beautiful that it was an amazement to her. The most modern flood-lighting was ready to be employed for this pool when the evening would grow darker. In the blue distances of twilight, old trees stood black against the sky. Many such people as she had seen yesterday in Hilton Square were arriving or had already arrived.

"You swim, of course?" Ramonde asked.

"Yes," Sonia said eagerly, "I love it."

"Then we'll swim before dinner."

"That suits me," Selwinn agreed lazily. "You girls will find me waiting about when you are ready."

Dressing-rooms for bathers were cabins among the trees, and attendants offered a variety of costumes. With scarcely a pretence of consulting her taste, Ramonde took a black and a white one, tossed the white one to Sonia, indicated a cabin, and vanished inside another herself.

"These people are poor," Sonia thought with astonishment as she undressed.

She felt a little uneasy therefore about the cost of this evening, although that was entirely the business of Ramonde and Selwinn.

When she came out of her cabin Ramonde had not yet emerged; and glancing down towards the swimming

pool, she saw Selwinn already in bathing shorts, looking up in her direction. That he was watching for her was obvious, because he waved a signal directly she appeared. So she walked slowly down the gently graduated flights of blue-green steps, which walk was like making an elaborate stage entry. She came to where he stood on the flower-bordered lawn that bordered the great bath.

"Do you dive?" he asked promptly.

With fresh amazement she eyed the complication of diving boards.

"Yes, but I have only dived from rafts and rocks when we have been down to the sea."

"How high were the rocks?"

"About as high as that," she told him, looking at the highest platform.

"I don't believe it," cried Ramonde's light voice. She had come up quietly behind them, still looking beautifully polished and finished, even in the simplicity of a tight black bathing costume. Her make-up was faultless, and would withstand immersion. "I'm not a secretary all the time," Sonia thought. "Here I'm just a guest. Here surely I can feel quite free." So suddenly, her spirits rising and rising to the gaiety of the soft air, and the promise of exciting amusement, she answered:

"I'll show you!" And ran towards the spring-boards and platform. Selwinn turned to watch her as she ran, and Ramonde watched Selwinn.

"She's pretty, isn't she, Francis?"

"Quite enchanting," Selwinn answered, "and I hope she can dive, because, look! She's going right up to the top."

For a moment the white figure poised against the unbelievable sky, and then, in a perfect swallow dive, cleaved the water.

"Oh, wonderful," Selwinn whispered; and Ramonde still watching him, said:

"You were quite afraid for her. It is funny how much an attractive girl can make any man care tremendously for her safety, even if he's only known her for five minutes."

"Hardly worth saying, my dear," said Selwinn laconically. "Shall we go in?"

They dived in spectacularly from the side, and found Sonia swimming on her back in the turquoise water.

"Anyway, Francis can't think I didn't offer her the right suit," Ramonde thought as she noted the bronze skin against the close-fitting sheath of white. "He can't think that I'm trying to spoil any little game she thinks she sees."

Ramonde began to make her way with a slow crawl stroke, up the length of the bath, starting alone, as if clearly intimating that she did not mind if the other two followed or not. Selwinn was not really amused by her tactics, though he could not help admiring the dexterity of her mind. He quite saw her drift. She probably meant to engage him as much as possible with this extraordinarily charming girl, whose attention thus might be gradually won away from Hugo to himself, and who would become subtly less of the sympathetic and intuitive secretary than it seemed to Dereham that she would prove to be.

Then Hugo, with his sick man's wearying impatience and his over-mastering wish to get his book finished, would dismiss her, and into the breach Ramonde would return. "No, no, Ramonde, my girl," Selwinn thought as he chased swiftly up the long pool after her, leaving Sonia to her own devices.

Indeed Sonia did not mind. She swam about like a happy fish, reflecting on the attractions of a woman like Ramonde Allett. It seemed established that there was an understanding between her and Dereham, and it was obvious that Selwinn admired her too.

What a life they led, these people! All pleasure!

Not that she herself was not enjoying this enchanting evening very much too. She stayed in the pool long after Ramonde and Selwinn had come out, and were lying back in deck-chairs on the lawn. They were wrapped in white towelling bath-robes which an attendant had brought them, and looked very snug and serene when at length she emerged, and came up to them.

Ramonde's eyes were a little critical.

"It's quite time we dressed, Miss May, and had dinner," she said, "unless we don't dress, and have it out of doors."

But Selwinn bettered this.

"We shall probably want to dance afterwards," he said.

"Are we going to dance *too*?" Sonia thought, incredulcusly surprised, and as she went beside Ramonde to the cabins among the trees, she said rather naïvely:

"What a lovely life!"

"Just a matter of comparison," Ramonde murmured with a brief laugh, and vanished inside her cabin. But Sonia stood for a moment before going in, looking back at the bath on which the floodlights now threw a magic glow. The colours of the lights changed, and flitted very slowly and caressively over the pool like a moving rainbow. She could hear the high-pitched voices calling to one another. Poised high up was a swimmer about to dive. On the green lawn, some people lay on the sun mattresses which had been left out, in the most alternated swimming suits; though some wore really astounding wrappers. All the women remained sleek and trim, all the men looked fit as idle horses. Surely it was a lovely life? Surely this was living gorgeously? "I suppose I have no right to it, really," she thought, turning into the cabin, "and an evening like this can't possibly come very often for me."

She didn't know if Selwinn was host or Ramonde hostess at the dinner that followed, until, with a light excuse, Ramonde, who had had her moments of abstraction during the meal, got up and left the table, and went over to a party of friends, where she sat down. Selwinn's eyes followed her for the moment, and Sonia could not quite read the expression in them. "Perhaps it's jealousy," she reflected, and, so naïvely did she think of herself and Ramonde that it could never occur to her that this man might find her quite as desirable as the older, wittier woman.

Then he exerted himself to be specially agreeable to her. She heard a dance band begin to play. The centre of the floor was clear.

"Dance?" he asked her, and, thoroughly exhilarated now, she rose. She had danced very seldom in her life, but Selwinn moved so easily and held her so comfortably and the rhythm of the band was so compelling, that their steps matched with unexpected perfection. As they passed the large table where Ramonde sat with her friends, Sonia saw her glance up sharply, but she did not seem to mind. She only waved and smiled.

Back at their table again, Selwinn asked:

"That was good, wasn't it, little Miss Innocence?"

"Very good," she assented.

He was looking at his wrist watch.

"Of course," he said, "it's all very well for Ramonde to keep late hours, and I don't matter, but how about you? You need to be bright and early in the mornings, don't you?"

She remembered then regretfully:

"Yes. But I feel in this place as if I could never be tired."

"Don't you deceive yourself," he laughed, "it's ten-thirty now, and there's a good hour's fast driving before we can possibly get back to town."

He was still wondering a little as to whether Ramonde had exactly thought out her procedure. Was she deliberately going to tempt this little girl out here and there, initiate her into night life and late hours, and send her, pale and pre-occupied with pleasures, to Hugo every morning? He sighed a little at having to take matters in hand, for he hated trouble, and he did not particularly want to leave the country club yet either, himself.

"We ought not to have brought her here," he considered; and then in a moment or two Ramonde herself solved the question by getting up and coming over to them. He rose and pulled out her chair.

"No, I'm not going to sit down," she said firmly. "The Murrays want me to go on with them to Johnny Seagull's house, and we'll catch him just about the time he gets back from the theatre. You met Johnny Seagull?" she addressed Sonia. "Do you know that, in the summer, he actually drives down to his country home every night after the performance." She looked round and laughed at Selwinn. "I must tell her all the bits of gossip," she said, "I expect she is ever so interested in actors. Well, we'll make Johnny give us one of his famous sausage suppers."

"Look here, Ramonde, Selwinn began. She interrupted him.

"Oh, *you* can't possibly come, my dear boy. This child must get home. You must take my car and drive her back at once. The Murrays will bring me back with the milk. Second delivery."

Sonia sat there marvelling at the casualness with which life arranged itself.

"So that's it, is it?" Selwinn muttered; and he said more seriously than usual, "All right, Ramonde."

But he looked at her very directly.

"I think you're lucky, Francis," said Ramonde, with

one of her impudent looks at Sonia, and she went back to the other table. Selwinn glanced at the girl, but she had not in the least caught the implication of Ramonde's remark.

"Come along," he said, "we've got to go. I'd better look after you for Hugo."

It was one of those heavenly nights, with a full moon, when any place in the world, city or country, must be beautiful. Francis Selwinn gave her a feeling of assurance. He was so easy and kind, and seemed to make things happen without any element of surprise.

"I suppose," he said as they drove quietly through already sleeping villages, "that there really was a horrid fracas this morning?"

"I didn't mind a bit," she said quickly; with reserve.

"And what part did old Hugo take in it?" he demanded.

"Very little."

"And that means," he said teasingly, "that I mustn't ask questions. What a loyal child you are. I think, indeed, I have found Hugo a treasure of a secretary."

He put his left hand down for a moment on her hands on her knee.

"Not cold?" he asked. "You should have brought some kind of wrap, shouldn't you."

"Oh, no," she said. Her fingers moved restlessly under his. Her memory of moonlight drives, and hands touching hands, was a scant one, but there had been an occasion, driving back to Lulham from a neighbouring village concert, when the doctor's son had said, "Not cold?" and put his hand over hers in just the same way. She reproached herself quite impatiently for this memory, because, of course, this was quite different; and they drove on; but soon she became reluctantly aware that perhaps it wasn't so different after all, for in the very quietest of lanes, that was, he had explained,

a short cut between two main roads, Selwinn drew up the car.

"It's far too nice," he suggested. "to hurry, don't you think so?"

She did think so, but she said hesitatingly:

"You know, I ought to get home, you reminded me yourself that I have to work in the morning."

"I know I did," he said beguilingly; "but then it's quite restful here, isn't it? It's different from being among a lot of bustle and noise." He drew out his cigarette case and paused a moment. It seemed as if they were both listening to catch any faint sound that might approach to "bustle and noise," and suddenly she heard crickets chirping in the grass. She laughed.

"Listen," she said, "it's quite hectic!"

"I'm sure it is," he replied. "The crickets may be having no end of a party."

She laughed again. Her laughter was so young and gay, and irresponsible and delighted that he thought: "She's enjoying it just like a truant child." And he put his arm along the back of the seat behind her.

"I think it was very nice of Ramonde to send us off like this." His hand closed gently on her shoulder.

"Sonia," he said, his voice dropping a note or two, "that's a charming name, by the way, Sonia, we are going to be great friends, aren't we? Don't you think we should be?"

"No," she said candidly, "I don't know that I do, because all this life is so new to me, and I must try to stick to work."

"But the evenings," he murmured. "You will want to get out of stuffy old London. There are such jolly places down the river, and a girl must have a little fun, mustn't she?"

Next moment his face was so close to hers that she had hardly time to draw back, but she did draw back

furiously, and he felt the palm of her hand hard against his mouth.

It was impossible to embarrass Francis Selwinn by any refusal, and he made the best of it by holding her hand firmly where it was, and kissing it.

"Why, Sonia," he said, "would it be so dreadful if I kissed you?"

"You don't realise," she began, and then he sensed, all at once, tears of mortification in this girl's eyes and in her voice. He patted her shoulder.

"My dear," he said laughingly, "don't take anything seriously. Just let life ride. If you don't want me to kiss you, I should hate to do it; but, Sonia, another day, perhaps."

"Then take your arm away."

"That," he assured her, "is really uncompanionable." But he removed his arm, and she did not know how shrewdly and intently he glanced at her profile rigidly set away from him.

"I do realise," he said. "I realise everything. You are a dear little girl, and you have all sorts of dear little ideas, and I assure you that Ramonde Allett would not understand any of them, but go on being little Miss Puritan as long as you can because that won't be for very long, and I think a woman should play as many rôles as possible in her all-too-short life."

His eyes danced.

"Life isn't so short," she denied.

"A pretty woman's is. However, I wouldn't offend you for the world, my dear." He handed his cigarette case.

"Will you have a cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

"I'd forgotten that," he said. "Do you mind if I light one?"

"And then will you take me home at once, please?"

"Yes, Sonia," he said, tossing the match away, "I will."

Ramonde's old car started up again a little noisily.

"Ramonde is a rough driver, I believe," he said as they moved off. "I'll bet she makes this poor old machine go just how she likes; as she tries to make people; but then Ramonde's a rough girl." He accelerated, and they came out into one of the big arterial roads.

"And it was such a nice lane, Sonia," he complained. "You are a very wasteful young woman."

They came into London just before midnight, and he dropped her on her own doorstep with a good-humoured, "Good-night."

She went in and closed the big Victorian door behind her softly and hurriedly, but she had no time now to review in her mind the events of that evening, for, pausing at the table in the dimly-lighted hall, she saw a note lying there. It was just a pencilled message.

"To Miss May,—

"Sir Hugo Dereham rang up at 9.30 and asked Miss May to go round at once if she was in early enough,"

What was early enough, and what was too late? She was out of the house again at once—there was no clock in the hall—and hurrying into Hilton Square. It looked as if all the lights in Number 14 were out. Anxious and puzzled and embarrassed, she thought, "I'd better make quite sure." And she took out of her bag the latch-key which Barton had given her, saying, "Sir Hugo likes the secretary to have a latch-key, miss."

The great door was not bolted, and she went into the hall. There was, after all, a dim light burning at the other end, outside the library door. She knocked softly on the door, heard no sound, and looked in. The French

windows into the garden were wide open, the room was flooded with moonlight, but she saw no one until she heard faint difficult gasping breaths. Dereham was lying half-in and half-out of the window as if he had staggered to it for air. She switched on the light instantly, ran to him, and knelt down by him. He was not unconscious. He was lying there suffering terribly, but saving himself all he could. His eyes looked straight into hers, and she tried to read their instructions. She put her hand down and felt his hand, and it closed fast on her fingers. It seemed a dumb message to her. She stayed there just as she was, kneeling beside him until he should make some further sign. For a few seconds, that were like hours, she stayed crouched on her knees, watching his face. His breathing grew no easier, and she moved behind him and lifted him carefully by the shoulders, slipping her knee under them, and so getting him raised a trifle, first on her lap, and gradually a little higher and a little higher, till his head leaned against her shoulder. He could give her no help, but his eyes looked their appreciation. Slowly his breathing grew very slightly easier. She stayed for five minutes holding him thus, unable to ring the bell or to telephone his doctor, or to fetch anything that might help him.

"Just make a little sign," she kept saying very quietly, "when there's anything you can tell me to do."

At the end of that terrible long time he spoke very quietly and slowly as if guarding himself against making any effort.

"Just one of my attacks. Heart. Good thing you came. Don't move."

So she stayed there on the threshold of the French windows still holding this inert weight. He was heavy with the heaviness of big bones and muscular development. Even in this hour of sickness he did not feel in the least flabby or weak.

"Just tell me," she repeated, "when there's anything to be done."

At last, he could tell her.

"Thank you very much, Miss May," still in that very low voice. "If you could prop me up for a few minutes, and get the brandy from that side-table, I should be all right."

She managed, by half-lifting and half-helping him, to get him propped against the window frame, and then she went to the side-table where brandy and soda was set on a tray. When he had sipped brandy, his face lost the ashy colour of pain, and half-lying there on the floor, he began to smile his sardonic smile.

"All right, Miss May," he said, "I shall be able to get up very soon."

"And then I can ring for Barton."

He did not reply. She held the glass again to his lips. It seemed to her miraculous that such pain could really pass, but it had passed, and with her slim strength she was helping him to get on his feet again, and he was in the swivel-chair before the writing-table.

"You got my message, I suppose," he said, "when you came in from the cinema or wherever you've been. Thank you for coming."

It was not that she wanted in the least to deceive him over the matter of where she had been, but she did not think that she ought to talk to him at all, or to allow him to talk, and she only replied:

"Of course I came at once, just to see if you were still up and expecting me. You know you told me you might have to work at all hours."

Almost in a whisper he said:

"Yes, but a girl like you, I don't know—that it should be—quite such an hour—as this."

"Don't talk," she begged. "I'll ring for Barton."

The sardonic smile again.

"No," he said, "let yourself out at once, quietly. I shall be able to ring for Barton myself in a few minutes. I have a special bell here wired up to his room. It's *all right.*"

"But I ought to stay——"

"I can't argue," he whispered. "Do what I say. Let yourself out quietly."

Most reluctantly she went, turning to watch him from the doorway, listening for the sound of the painful breathing as she crossed the hall. But it was quiet, he was really easier. Why would not he let her stay and ring for Barton when it was obvious that he needed all the help and attention available? Why did not he let her telephone his doctor? At the front door again she paused, and stood listening for quite some minutes, and then she heard far up above her the faint imperative ringing of a bell. He had rung for Barton. Then all might be well.

Almost at once she heard feet running downstairs. Then she obeyed Dereham and let herself out very quietly, and so, back again home. As she lay in bed, all the previous events of the evening were wiped from her mind. Enchantments of the swimming pool and the dance floor and the flowers and the trees and the blue distances of twilight in that place where Ramonde had taken her—they were of no account. Only that half-hour of close communion, helping Hugo Dereham through his agony, holding his head against her shoulder, feeling his imploring hand gripping hers, remained. It was shatteringly strange to remember how imploring that mute act had been. She had seen him in his weakness. Ah, but he was still strong! She was filled through and through with a desire to help him. Together they would work greatly to finish the book. She was sure she could save him an immense amount of labour and research. She was so sorry for him, so sorry, so sorry. . . .

She fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

DEREHAM awoke the next morning feeling unexpectedly well and rested. Some amount of mental peace, that was at the same time stimulation, had fallen upon him by the time Barton came in, with last night's lines of anxiety still graven upon his face, carrying the early tea tray. The servant drew the curtains back, showing a wonderful summer morning, and he said:

"Doctor Allison will be here at any moment, sir."

"Who sent for him?" Dereham queried sharply.

"I did, sir."

"I've told you before," said Dereham deliberately, "that I'm tired of all this damned fuss. I don't want to see doctors unless I ask for them. There's nothing more they can do, and you know it."

The butler stood at the bedside looking at him, and in his mind was a deep sorrow, for he had been with Dereham in many countries as personal servant, and his admiration for him was profound. He had for him, moreover, the attachment that all those felt who knew the real man. His determination that the doctor should see his master before he got up was definite.

"There's the alleviation, sir," he suggested.

"Alleviation be damned," said Dereham, "I have all the instructions there are about alleviation, and you know that too."

The butler was listening to a car drawing up outside.

"That will be the doctor, sir," he said, and went out.

Dereham sat up against his high-piled pillows and began to drink his tea. He was not given to self-pity, but this morning, as he sat there looking straight out

into the sunlit square and the tops of trees of varied greens, realisation would come more deeply than ever before. My God, this is too fine a world to leave! The door opened and the doctor came in with his quick, quiet tread and a keen look for the man in the straight hard bed.

"Well," he said, "I am told you had a nasty go last night, but all the same, you aren't looking much the worse for it."

He sat down and put his fingers on Dereham's pulse.

"I don't feel any the worse for it, strangely enough," said Dereham.

"What had you been doing?" the doctor asked. "Anything interesting?"

"Work, and it had been unusually interesting yesterday."

"I understand," said the doctor, "that you were alone when the attack came on and had to get through it by yourself."

"I managed," Dereham answered.

"Well, tell me all about it," said Allison.

For a moment Dereham was quiet. Last night he had had only hazy ideas of what had been done for him, but this morning they returned clearly. He could feel his head again resting against the girl's shoulders; and how she had been patient and quiet, and quick and brave; and how, as he had recovered himself by sheer strength of will as much as anything else, and had told her to go, she went. He had an idea that that was not just dumb obedience, but sheer delicate understanding, and he thought as he leaned against his pillows with Allison's fingers on his wrist, "I suppose she probably saved my life—coming in like that although it was close on midnight. Women are remarkable in a way, so literal. If Francis had found me some giddy boy, he would just have thought it was too late when he came

in from the cinema or wherever it was she went; or he would have rung up to inquire, and no one would have answered, and he would have rung off again, jolly glad to be saved trouble. And Barton might have found a corpse next morning."

"Well, Dereham?"

"I don't think there's much to tell you. It was all as usual, except that the servants had gone to bed, and I had a bit of a struggle to pull myself round; and, by the way, I didn't tell Barton to send for you this morning."

"He knows he has got to send for me whenever this happens, and whenever he thinks fit," said the doctor. "You just leave that fellow alone, Dereham."

"All right," said Dereham; "but now if you will go, old man, I'm about to get up."

"It won't hurt you," said the doctor, as if surprised, "though, mind you, you might as well work in bed. You can dictate, can't you?"

"Let that come later."

"Well, take care of yourself," the doctor said, "because next time——" He broke off.

"Oh, I know there will be one next time, anyway," Dereham answered.

"A good many next times," said Allison. "But next time you may not get over it quite so comfortably as you have now, and you will be obliged to stay in bed."

Dereham rang, and said:

"Now get along, old man, because Barton is standing at the front door, waiting to question you minutely."

He got up slowly, bathed and dressed, conserving his energies, and making no unnecessary movements. The attack had been hellish, but, now he came to think of it, not quite so hellish as some which had preceded it. He was tying his tie with hands that were satisfactorily steady, when the telephone rang in his room. He

lifted the receiver to hear Ramonde's high-pitched voice.

"*Dear* Hugo, how are you? Before Barton put me through just now, he tried to fob me off, saying you had had one of your nasty attacks. But I simply had to hear your voice myself, and to make sure that you are feeling better."

"That's very solicitous of you, Ramonde. I'm right as rain this morning."

"You'll take care of yourself, Hugo, won't you? Now promise, my sweet."

"How much is all that worth really, Ramonde?" he could not help asking sardonically.

"It's worth all it sounds and a thousand times more," her reply came. "Are you up?"

"I am."

"I'm in bed," she said. "Got home very late from the Country Club last night. I drove Francis Selwinn down, and, of course, your little secretary."

He knew that he was more surprised than was good for him, and he put out a hand and impatiently dragged up a chair so that he could sit down while he listened to her.

"Oh, really," he said harshly. "Miss May? Why?"

"Oh, my dear, but surely you would know that Francis would never miss a chance like that! How pretty she looks. You see, she was having a tea at my flat when he came in, and he conceived the great idea. I don't know why one does these things. I'm tired out."

"I don't know why either," his voice was still harsh. "You were all back in town well before midnight, anyway."

"I wasn't," she protested. "I wasn't home till three this morning."

He hesitated; the kind of hesitation that is audible over the wire, because he remembered that he was not

going to say "Miss May was here at midnight with me." At last he said:

"I don't care for my secretary to be out so late. It will make her inefficient."

"But, darling Hugo, she wasn't. You *know* how good natured I am. Knowing Francis's proclivities, and supposing that the girl might not be too unwilling, I offered them the car to go home in by themselves, and I came back with the Murrays. You know the Murrays, dear Hugo?"

"All right, Ramonde," he said, through his teeth; "thank you. I'm a bit off colour this morning, and, anyway, I never chatter over the telephone. Damn your Murrays."

He hung up the receiver. It didn't matter a bit—treating Ramonde to that sort of thing. As a man, he knew of course perfectly well that she was what Francis Selwinn had described to Sonia as a rough girl. But something else mattered. It had a disturbing effect on him that Selwinn and Sonia should have driven up from the country together late, and alone. It was more disturbing than the fact that Sonia had already been down there among that crowd. She hadn't wasted much time! Then he willed himself to be quiet, and went down, still slow and quiet, to breakfast. While he breakfasted, his ears were very sharp. It was stupid that he could be listening for the sound of a latch-key, for the front door to open and shut, unlikely that he should hear such little noises across the spaces of the big house. He immersed himself in his newspapers.

It was strange to him that, under sentence of death, all the new gained importance. Now, when he had so little time, he could feel luridly about the political significance of a rising in Afghanistan, or trouble on the Indian Frontier, or the news of an earthquake shock at Rio.

Sonia also was sitting with sharpened ears in the little office room at the back of the long hall. Barton had been in to tell her in a low voice that Sir Hugo had been ill again, and he hoped that she would be very careful.

"Not that I know what you can do, miss, but you understand what I mean. Save him all you can. It was a great pity I'd gone to bed last night, but he sent me off, miss. 'Lock up,' he says, 'and get off to bed. I want the house quiet. I'm going to work.' Luckily, I'm a light sleeper and I heard him at once when he rang the bell, which was a mercy he was able to do, seeing that he was quite alone."

"I'll be very, very careful, Barton," she promised.

"And since you are one of the household, miss, anyway, even if only temporary, I thought I would ask you if any of that noisy lot come round him, that Miss Allett and her friends, you will just head them off all you can, won't you?"

"I'll do what I can, Barton, but I'm afraid I'm not quite an important enough person to do much."

"That's all right, miss," he said confidentially. "The way Sir Hugo asked you to pour out tea and help him with people yesterday, showed that he's going to be very reasonable where you're concerned."

She burst out with a question she had been longing to ask ever since she had opened the front door.

"Is he better now, Barton?"

"Oh, yes, miss, he has made a very good recovery, and he has had breakfast."

"Has he seen the doctor?"

"Oh, yes, miss, we must just keep him quiet, and keep quiet ourselves, and not let him worry."

The servant went out. "What a nice butler he is," she thought, "he's very comforting." She wished that she could have told him the whole story of last night's happenings, because he evidently felt his responsibilities

and would have wished to know, but Dereham's look and words as she had left him, were still sharp in her mind. She was not to say anything about it. No doubt he would explain further presently.

And this morning she was also troubled and a little dismayed by one of her mother's extraordinary and optimistic outbursts. She took the letter from her bag and read it over again.

"Father and I have been thinking so much about you, darling, and talking about you too. We are longing to hear all your news, and we are quite excited. You know, dear, we always have felt that you never believed us when we said that one day a fairy prince would arrive for you like he did for me——"

"Oh, the old babies!" Sonia murmured to herself. She read on to the last repetitive sentence of that girlish letter from a woman of fifty:

"And we would like to know all about Sir Hugo Dereham, Sonia dear, please tell us all, and we would like to know about Mr. Francis Selwinn too."

She was somehow quite angry with those two dreamy parents as she folded the letter up and put it back into her bag. "I won't have it," she kept repeating to herself. "I won't have it! I'll make them wake up. I'll tell them I'm just in a work-a-day world, a work-a-day girl; and I'm likely to stay there."

Then suddenly she sprang up as Dereham came in. He stood for a moment against the door after he had shut it, and they smiled at each other the smile of a shared and shattering memory. But there was an iciness about his manner. His eyes looked at her very directly and not very kindly.

"Good-morning, Miss May."

She hid her overwhelming sympathy, her anxiety for him.

"Good-morning, Sir Hugo. But, please, ought you to get up?"

He weighed this question; came near, and sat down beside the table. She sat down again too.

"You did some very useful work yesterday," he said. "I looked over all your personal notes and your arrangement of material after dinner yesterday evening, which was why I telephoned you about half-past nine that I would like you to come back for an hour. I hope the message was transcribed correctly. However, you were out, and you couldn't come."

"I came as soon as I could," she said a little nervously.

"Yes." His eyes were hard and unfriendly. "And I realise that as things turned out, it was a good thing for me that you did, but you should not have come; it was too late. I'd better be frank with you, Miss May, because I don't know that you quite realise the ways of this wicked world."

His lip curled a little mockingly, for, unknown to him, had she not very quickly slipped into the ways of pleasure, last night?

"Is it a wicked world?" she said.

He shrugged.

"Oh, more or less. Anyway, I should not have been likely to ask a girl like yourself to come in at midnight and work with me after I had sent the servants to bed. I suppose you see that."

She replied quite simply:

"I hadn't thought of it at all, Sir Hugo."

"Then what did you think?" he asked.

"I simply wanted to meet your requirements, Sir Hugo. You asked for me, and I came."

"And where were you," he inquired, "that you

couldn't come before? Were you hypnotising yourself with Greta Garbo, or do you follow the male film stars?"

"Miss Allett took me down to dinner in the country, Sir Hugo."

"Oh!" he remarked politely, "did she really? You two alone?"

"And Mr. Selwinn."

"Where did you go?"

"To a very wonderful place," she told him quickly. "The most gorgeous swimming pool that I've ever seen. In fact, I've never seen an open-air swimming pool before. Everything was lovely. I was so surprised that dinner was just like it would be in a London restaurant."

"Do you know anything about London restaurants yet?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that Selwinn had given her luncheon at the Savoy, and she had again a confused feeling of dismay, of withholding anything that would surely be so unimportant to a Hugo Dereham. But, all the same, Selwinn had impressed upon her, "Don't tell," and at the time she had supposed his reasons to be good.

Dereham was looking at her with hard steady eyes.

"Like what one imagines a London restaurant to be," she amended feebly, and the blush rose again transparently to her face.

"Indeed," he remarked. "I expect I know the country club you mean. Ramonde and her lot haunt it on summer nights, or rather at summer dawns, usually. I am surprised that she left in time for you to be home before midnight."

"She didn't," said Sonia, "she stayed on with friends and Mr. Selwinn kindly drove me back, because he said, and I agreed, that I mustn't be late if I was to do my work properly for you in the morning."

Dereham was taken aback and sat in silence. He had

set traps for her; she could have lied; but she had told him everything. Clearly, she had no idea that there could be the slightest reason for any concealment. Neither was there. "She had a right to go," he said to himself, "since they asked her, only they should not have asked her. And she should have realised that what she is paid for is to be my secretary and that she has her definite place among my friends, and should not step out of it."

Now she returned his look very clearly, because disturbing thoughts had occurred to her too, and she voiced them.

"You don't think that I wanted to deceive you in any way surely, Sir Hugo?"

"No," he said shortly.

"If there is anything else you would like to know——"

"No," he said, again shortly. But there was something else he wanted to know, and that he was not going to ask her. He knew and liked his cousin, Francis Selwinn, but because he knew him, he wanted to ask this girl if he had made love to her. But the necessity was upon him of keeping very quiet, of indulging in no moods, and he knew angrily that he must submit to it.

"So you enjoyed the evening," he said abruptly.

"I loved the diving and the swimming," she said.

"But the rest?" he persisted.

"I suppose it was wonderful," she considered slowly.

"Ah," said Dereham, rallying her not too kindly, "you suppose? You are not quite sure? Tell me how the rest of it appeared to you."

"It's unreal," she said.

"How unreal?" he teased, and still she felt that his teasing was not too kind. "That swimming pool cost many thousands of pounds, isn't that real enough? And the old country house has been refitted with every modern improvement. That seems real. And what

could you have more material than too much food and champagne ? "

" You make me feel ungrateful, Sir Hugo," she stammered in dismay.

" You hadn't any real reason for gratitude," he said in a hard voice. " You wouldn't have been taken down unless they wanted you to go. Did you imagine that you saw any charming philanthropists there ? "

She hesitated. " That's just it," she thought, " every one seemed so light and selfish and trivial and greedy. They all wanted so much, and to be waited upon, and every luxury, and there *was* too much food and champagne." Then she answered :

" I expect, Sir Hugo, I haven't enough experience to judge people who are so new to me."

" If you had stayed longer," he said, as if with pleasure, " you would have seen more and learned more than you seem to have done. All sorts of silly people are quite riotous down there in the early hours. They go tearing about the country waking up wretched cottagers who want to sleep. They go treasure hunting, and cooking breakfasts they don't want in each other's houses, and coming home at dawn just fagged out, although I must say women are wonderful. They manage to get fresh again by cocktail time at one o'clock, and it doesn't matter what men look like, does it ? "

" Doesn't it ? " she murmured.

" However," he said, I see that you are a little lady who is able to have opinions of her own. Well, no doubt they will be useful to you. We'll get to work if you will come into the library."

In the library he stretched himself upon a couch.

" You must excuse this," he said in his own courteous voice again with that curious bitterness out of it. " I shall have to take to-day very slothfully."

"Of course," she protested eagerly.

"Perhaps you will sit near me, and give me that sheaf of notes off the writing-table."

He dictated just as fluently, sure of what he wanted to say. Two hours had slipped by, and her pencil had scarcely paused, when he stopped.

"That's all," he said. "If you get through with typing that to-day—and I want it done to-day—we will have done rather more than enough."

"It will be done to-day."

"Good," he said, "and now there's something I'm going to ask you. You can see for yourself that it would have been very convenient had you been in the house yesterday evening, because, by dinner-time, I knew that I should want you. You see, there are peculiar difficulties entirely owing to the stupidity of my ill-health, and, after all, it's going to be inconvenient if I have to telephone all over London for you, isn't it?"

"I was very sorry——"

"Oh, not at all," he said, "one must be reasonable, but it would be better for me if you would think about living in the house instead of outside it. I suppose I could explain to you." But he paused, and his eyes rested upon her for a moment and he thought as Selwinn had done three days ago, "No, it's a bit grim. It might frighten her." Though she hadn't been frightened, he remembered, last night, when she came in, and found him in his extremity of pain. She had been marvellous; brave; one would guess that she was high mettled. It was just this high mettled quality about her that made a strange, strong appeal to him, and which made him feel, "I like this girl near to me. I don't think she'd let one down. I think she would rise to it all the time."

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked aloud.

She would have agreed instantly but for her mother's

letter. It made her want to keep as aloof from Dereham as she possibly could; not by smile or look to get even spiritually or mentally nearer; to make herself appear the perfect machine and no more.

"I want to do whatever is most convenient to you, Sir Hugo," she began. "But——"

"But you don't want to live in the house," he interrupted sharply. Then he was ashamed of his sharpness, and annoyed by his own feeling of disappointment. It was a curious feeling to have, and at any other moment but this crucial one he would have laughed at himself. Why did he care so much, so long as she held herself for the future entirely at his disposal always?

It was because he cared so much about his history of Fennimore, of course.

She was answering with a trouble look on her face. "I would rather not live here really, Sir Hugo, but I can easily promise never to be out if you are in the least likely to want me, and I can always telephone about dinner-time or later, to find out what you wish."

"You had better have dinner with me to-night when you will have thought it over a little more," he said abruptly.

She was shy.

"Thank you very much."

"No, don't thank me," he said, "it's more an instruction than an invitation, Miss May, and there will be people here again this afternoon, I fancy. I hope you will help me as you did before."

"As you wish, of course," she said, "only Miss Allett——"

"It's nothing to do with Miss Allett," he said coldly.

He could not quite get the thought of Selwinn out of his mind, and Ramonde's telephone conversation, earlier that morning, rankled. While he listened and replied, he had told himself that he saw through all that chatter.

And yet there might be plenty of truth in it. He was not going to discount it entirely.

"I should like to say to you," he said, "that the five pounds a week which I offer is for your services during the day, and a long day, nine till six. If you return in the evening to work with me because of my infirmities, I shall pay you half a guinea a time." And then, seeing her amazement and confusion, he added: "You must learn to drive a bargain, my dear child. Wouldn't you like your extra half-guineas?"

"Very much, indeed," she said, as she imagined herself collecting those half-guineas, sending them home and writing stringently, "Pay the butcher, darling, and the grocer. Mind you don't spend it on what you call 'something beautiful.' Promise me this, darling. And mind you don't give it away either." Because they would be just as likely to give it away as to buy themselves something beautiful, and they were likelier to do either than to pay in full the butcher and the grocer. Indeed, their meals, she guessed, would concern them less than ever now that she had gone.

Dereham rose.

"Think about it," he said, taking his place at the writing table. "I'll rely on you to be on the spot"—he smiled a little—"at tea-time, and you'll remember that you're dining here."

So she went back to the little room where presently Barton brought her the most delicious of luncheons on a great silver tray, and all the time she typed the material he had provided that morning, she thought almost with aversion of Dereham's request. Her pride was up in arms. She did not want to offend him in even the very slightest degree. Her common sense told her, "This is a most ordinary request. Plenty of personal secretaries have to live in the house where they work." There was no doubt that the comfort and luxury would far out-

weigh any little curtailment of freedom in the eyes of most girls. "Besides!"—then the horrid thought came again, suggested by that mother who was not in the least horrid but most delicately sensitive and imaginative—"most girls would think this a 'chance.'"

The thought increased her proud reluctance to agree. She tried to put it all from her and to devote herself to the work in hand, and had succeeded in forgetting the galling problem when Barton came in again for the lunch tray.

He shut the door behind him and did not for a moment take up the tray, but stood by her table as if respectfully waiting to say something to her. So she stopped typing and looked up.

"Excuse me, miss," he said; "but Sir Hugo has told me it is quite likely that you will live in the house. I was very glad to hear it."

"It isn't quite decided yet," she said hurriedly.

"I know that, miss, because Sir Hugo was rather indefinite, but the housekeeper is to get two rooms ready for you on the top floor. Quite a little flat as a matter of fact, miss, for the top floor was originally designed for complete quarters for a young gentleman. In fact, I can remember Sir Hugo himself having it every time he came home while he was at Cambridge. You would be very comfortable."

She could hear her mother crying innocently to the one or two visitors who now and again penetrated the sanctified peace of Lulham Cottage, "Sonia has actually a little flat all to herself in Sir Hugo Dereham's mansion! He thinks nothing is too good for her!"

She answered Barton at last:

"I'm sure it would be very comfortable. Far more comfortable than I need, but I don't like to be the cause of——" She hesitated, and finished lamely, "Giving so much trouble."

"Trouble, miss?" he said. "There's really hardly enough trouble to be taken in this house, we're so well staffed, you see, miss. I'm sure it would give the third housemaid just a nice little job to do if she had a lady to wait upon. Quite a well-trained girl, miss; the housekeeper sees to that."

He took up the tray, but still stood waiting.

"I hope you enjoyed your lunch, miss."

"Just delicious," she said.

"When you reside here, miss, if there's any particular dish you fancy, I'm sure you have only to ask Mrs. Roberts, the housekeeper."

"But you see, Barton, it isn't quite decided——"

He said: "Allow me, miss," with a certain managing quality in his respectable voice. "I hope you will let me tell you that I think it's quite necessary that Sir Hugo's secretary should be on the premises. I have watched over Sir Hugo for a good many years now, ever since he was a young gentleman just down from the university, and all the time he was abroad in perfectly horrible climates, miss, working his heart out for his country." He paused. "Well, that's just what he's done, worked his heart out, and I'm obliged to say, miss, that I think it's your duty to fall in with his wishes, even if I am exceeding my duty in saying it."

"You're not exceeding your duty, Barton," she murmured quite timorously.

"Then, miss, I hope I may take it that you are coming into residence here to-night."

"That's very sudden, you see, Barton. After all, I should have to give notice at the club where I'm staying."

"That young ladies' hostel," said Barton loftily. "Oh, a trifle like a few days' room rent in lieu of notice doesn't count here, miss. All that counts here is Sir Hugo."

The servant spoke with an almost fanatic devotion

that reached her heart. "How they love him," she thought, puzzled, for to her, his predominant qualities were irony, and an almost grimness which contrasted all the more startlingly with the easiness of his cousin Francis.

"The rooms will be ready to-night in any case, miss," said the butler, turning to the door.

"I should have a certain amount of packing to do, Barton," she temporised.

"Packing, miss? Why Ellen, that's the third housemaid I spoke of just now, would go to your place and do it for you in half an hour or less."

"Look here, Barton," she said suddenly, surprising herself by the way she spoke, "all this fuss and attention —I'm not prepared for it. Am I just a secretary, or am I not? I'm here to work and not to be waited upon."

"You are here, miss," said the butler, "to serve Sir Hugo in the very best way you can, like all the rest of us, and if this is the way, miss, I beg you will take it, and I have to say also, that the flowers have arrived."

"The flowers, Barton?"

"Yes, miss. The florist's man is waiting with them in the hall, and Sir Hugo would like you to see their arrangement before five o'clock. We may expect a little company."

"Very well," she said, timorous again.

"Thank you, miss."

He went out, not latching the door, leaving it ajar a little, a hint that it was time she came out of that room and took on the other responsibilities just suggested to her. She put her sheets of paper together under a paper-weight, shut down her typewriter and went out into the hall. The house was very dim and cool, and shady, with windows open and sun-blinds down this hot, early summer day. It was extraordinarily desirable, this place into which she, just little Sonia May, had

dropped by an amazing miracle of luck, and yet with so many tremors in her doubtful heart. The florist's man indeed stood in the hall, surrounded by boxes of lilies, roses, sweet peas, all in the most perfect bloom.

"Good-afternoon, miss."

He looked instantly to her for orders. Could she give them? It was impossible! But she must rally herself to all occasions; and she said:

"I'll have them divided between the hall and the drawing-room, please, just keeping about three dozen of the red roses for Sir Hugo's library."

She went unhappily into the great pastel-coloured drawing-room, and he followed her carrying his boxes. Ramonde Allett would think that she ought to be doing this if any personal hand intruded other than the purely professional one. "I'm in an entirely false position," Sonia thought; "horribly false!" But there was nothing else for it but to bring all her judgment to bear upon the disposal of the flowers.

It was not until four-thirty that their arrangement seemed to her perfect. The florist's man approved:

"It's very nice, miss; you have lovely taste. What we call a sense of decoration."

"Have I really?" she thought nervously.

When he had gone, she was returning to the little office room to look in a mirror and tidy her mutinous hair when she met the housekeeper. Mrs. Roberts stood there almost as if in ambush.

"I'm the housekeeper, Miss May," she said. She was just as pleasant a person, just as deferential and knowledgeable, as was Barton, "and if you are going to help Sir Hugo entertain company this afternoon, perhaps you would like to go up to your rooms. I understand you are going to live with us."

"That's not decided," Sonia cried again.

She would refuse point blank! The more they pressed

these obligations upon her, the more she would, tactfully of course, resist them. Her mind was thoroughly made up to refuse Sir Hugo's request, pointing out to him once more, only far more firmly, how she could always remain at his service and be at his call even though she lived half a street away.

"Oh, but it will be decided, Miss May," the housekeeper replied comfortably, "and, meanwhile, you may as well be comfortable."

Somehow Sonia found herself ushered into the little gilded lift and borne upwards with Mrs. Roberts in control.

"There," said the housekeeper opening the door, "you will see these two rooms and the bath are just like a little self-contained flat. You can shut yourself right off, Miss May, and be alone."

"All above the tree-tops," Sonia said, with a sudden cry of delight, darting to the window, and indeed from this eyrie she could look down into the deep green tree-tops of Hilton Square.

"I have been with Sir Hugo a long time, just the same as Barton," said Mrs. Roberts behind her. "When he first came down from the university I looked after him for a little bit, and then when he went abroad for so many years he had already inherited this house. His parents had died, you see, so I stayed here and looked after it in his absence. I want everything done for him that can be done, you understand, Miss May." Her hands trembled just a little. "I'm told nothing," she said; "but how do I know that he's not far worse than he says and looks?"

"I want to do everything I can," Sonia murmured, turning away from the window, and concerned to see the housekeeper's kind eyes bright with tears.

"Just this little thing Sir Hugo asks," said Mrs. Roberts in a very gentle voice. "Might I inquire, Miss

May, is it that you want your freedom like all modern young ladies, and you think this would spoil it ? "

" No, no," Sonia cried emphatically, " freedom isn't a lot of use to me here, Mrs. Roberts. I have no friends in London."

" Then is it because of what you think people would say, Miss May ? "

Her shrewd eyes, from which she had sensibly winked back the tears, noted the girl's embarrassment. She did not want to answer that question, and the housekeeper could not guess that people, to Sonia, only meant two quiet, married lovers who so incongruously had mothered and fathered her down in a green place in Devon.

The older, experienced woman imagined that she was thinking of Miss Ramonde Allett and all the superficial people who dropped into this house, as she often said to Barton, just for what they could get.

" Because if you are, Miss May," she said, " they're not worth noticing, a lot like that."

She hesitated a moment, and then turned away, saying : " But I expect you want to be by yourself, Miss May. Tea will be sent into the drawing-room at five o'clock. No one comes before then ; they prefer their cocktails at half-past."

Sonia was alone on that delightful top floor. She explored. It was as Mrs. Roberts said, self-contained. There was an outer door from which you stepped into a little lobby. There were the attractive bedroom in which she now stood, and the big sitting-room which must have been a study, for it was half-lined with books. The rooms had certainly a simplicity that was almost stark, for, of course, as she now knew, they had been a young man's rooms, in his parents' house years ago ; but in the way of women she began instantly to imagine them with bright cretonnes on the dark chairs and at

the windows. She saw flowers in them and a fire in that charming hob grate when winter drew near. For of course she would still be here. They would not have finished the book by then.

It was imperative to draw herself sternly away from this inexcusable lapse of will. "*I can't live here,*" she kept insisting, because her mother's letter had bitten so deep into her heart. She herself could not think why it had hurt her so.

But to be planning such plans! To be thinking of the advantages to be derived from this sick man!

And there came a little rush of tears to Sonia's eyes, just as had come to Mrs. Roberts, and she said aloud impulsively, "Why, I would *give* him my services if I could only afford it!"

There was no time to analyse that, and, anyway, she believed herself, and this thought that ran so ardently into her mind.

She believed that it was his illness that made a bond between herself and Dereham. It was because she had fitted in at once so perfectly and easily with his scheme of work, or it was because he himself, having been obviously pleased with her unexpected personality, had already begun to depend upon her.

One had to rise to people's expectations!

Anyway, the beginnings, as she saw them, were glorious, and only the sweet foolish little letters arriving from Lulham had the power to spoil things.

She combed her hair, left her hat and gloves in the bedroom, found that the finest and softest of clean towels —such a supply of them—and a delicate soap had already been put into the bathroom. Temptation! Temptation! That was Mrs. Roberts. . . .

"But I won't," she thought as she washed her hands. "I won't." And she went down.

Contrary to Mrs. Roberts's prophecy, two people had

arrived early, and they were Ramonde and Selwinn. Ramonde gave her a cool nod merely as she came into the room, but Selwinn smiled at her delightfully. Dereham stood on the hearth with them. They made a little group on which she felt she had somehow intruded, as it was Ramonde's design that she should do. Ramonde managed effects with the cleverness of an actress, who by a mere look or intonation can convey more than most people do with speech. "She wants to be hostess," Sonia thought, but without nervousness this time. She looked interrogatively at Dereham, and he said:

"You will help me as you did before, won't you, Miss May?"

So she went over to the tea-table, and just as before, precisely as the clock struck five, Barton came in bearing the Queen Anne tea service on its vast silver tray. Selwinn watched the girl while Ramonde persistently held Dereham in conversation. Her persistence penetrated to Selwinn, and while he was looking at Sonia, he was listening carefully, for Ramonde was a clever and determined woman, and though he had resigned himself to spending a great part of his day and a great many of his evenings with her to head her off from Hugo, she might beat him yet.

"If that girl," he thought, looking at Sonia, "knew a bit more about the ropes, Ramonde wouldn't even be placed."

He sauntered over to the tea-table and asked in a low voice: "None the worse for last night?"

"Much the better." She smiled up at him.

How kind he was, and comforting. Even when he made his fingers touch hers as he took the tea cups, she could not take him very seriously, this nice Francis Selwinn. Whenever he was near her he gave her confidence.

"Tea, Ramonde?" he asked, offering a cup.

"No tea, thanks," said Ramonde's high-pitched voice.

"Tea, Hugo?"

"Thanks."

Again the group of three stood talking of all those things, light and trivial, artistic or erudite, scandalous or boring, which seemed to make up a large part of this kind of life. Sonia poured out her own tea and sat tranquil enough, until suddenly more arrivals came in, in quick succession. She heard one or two of the women say:

"How lovely the flowers are, Hugo. Your florist is improving." And secretly she was excited and gratified. The women turned and glanced at her after he had answered—so that he had probably told them whose was the responsibility—and they quickly glanced away again. Their eyes were cool and critical. Already most of them knew, either from Ramonde and then from each other, that this pretty girl was a new idea of Hugo's, a secretary, an intriguing wench as Ramonde had called her. Different men from the ones who had been here the other afternoon—what a lot of people Dereham knew—drifted over to the table occasionally and talked with her. Again the cocktails came in, and people grew afterwards more animated. There was again that babel of talk behind which, and the tea tray, she was quite happy to lose herself; and presently, just as on the other afternoon, again Ramonde Allett was the last to leave, except Selwinn.

But this time Selwinn was not dining at the house. Sonia had wondered, a trifle nervously, if he would make a third with Dereham and herself, but he was rather ostentatiously urging Ramonde to come away, because, it seemed, they had a dinner engagement together.

"I suppose he's in love with her too," Sonia thought, and she wondered what Dereham thought of that, and though, having seen Ramonde's minute flat and had a glimpse into her mode of life, she did not on the whole

envy her, she appeared an enviable creature in that skin-fitting grey frock and the little yellow hat pulled over one eyebrow, and two men competing for her. For Sonia was sure that Hugo Dereham competed.

"I'm coming, Francis," Ramonde said at last. Her hand was linked affectionately in Dereham's arm as she spoke. "The car's outside, and you know I can always dress in five minutes, I've nothing to lace in, and nothing that hooks up."

"No, your figure is wonderful, dear," Selwinn said, in his most devoted way.

Dereham stood silent in a candid attitude of waiting for them to go, although Ramonde's hand was still in his arm.

"I was just wondering," said Ramonde, raising her face a little, and looking towards the far corner where the tea-table stood, "if we couldn't drop Miss May at her exciting door. She looks tired."

"Are you tired?" Dereham asked very quickly and authoritatively before she could speak.

"No, I'm not tired, Sir Hugo."

"She looks pasty," said Ramonde, "too much dissipation last night. I'm sure the peace of the Hens' Club will be very good for her."

"As a matter of fact," said Hugo then, not moving, "I'm asking Miss May to take up residence here, and I'm hoping she will."

"Live here?" Ramonde echoed.

"There's the bachelor flat for her upstairs," he said, and while he spoke his eyes were on Sonia sitting quite quiet in that corner behind his magnificent silver.

"Oh," said Ramonde in an indescribably insinuating voice, "of course Miss May will jump at that. You're in great luck, Miss May," she called, still with that insinuation in her voice. "Do your parents know? I think your parents ought to know, my dear!"

"Don't be a fool, Ramonde," said Dereham, and his voice, not raised, seemed to go through the room like the flash of a drawn sword. Sonia stood up.

"I've told Sir Hugo that I'm so sorry I could not possibly make the arrangement," she said, and was completely out of breath on the last word.

"That's right," Ramonde called. "Put a value on yourself, my dear child. It's well to be clever in addition to being damned good looking, but I expect you know."

"Shut up," said Dereham; and Sonia, still out of breath, thought with horror, "He shouldn't speak to her like that. I expect it is just natural to her to say these things, I expect they don't mean anything." She remembered that Ramonde had been astonishingly nice to her yesterday, and she thought: "He said 'shut up' just as if he were saying 'lie down' to a dog. *He shouldn't.*"

Yet Ramonde was obviously quite unhurt by what he said.

"I only want to warn Miss May, Hugo."

Selwinn, with a perfect gesture, laughing, yet with a little effect of jealousy, took her hand from his cousin's arm and imprisoned it in his own.

"Come along, my dear, come along."

"Good-bye," said Dereham, still without moving.

Selwinn was the perfect manager of affairs. As he took Ramonde gracefully out of the room, it was quite marvellous how much grace he contrived to preserve for them all for those difficult three minutes, and exit. Then at last Dereham spoke to Sonia; and his voice was very gentle.

"I suppose you want to go back to the Hens' Club to change your frock, although, of course, you look very nice as you are."

"Yes," she said, getting up; "I would like to dress, please, Sir Hugo." He walked beside her out of the long

room to the front door and did not remind her that she was hatless. The little country girl was so disturbed that she was forgetting London formalities.

"And you're not going to bring your luggage back with you?" he asked still gently.

"No," she faltered, "I'm sorry, Sir Hugo, I'm sorry."

She ran down the steps and into the street.

It was not till she got half-way to the ladies' residential club that Sonia realised she was hatless and gloveless, just as she might have been in the village street at home, but she did not go back; she went on to the refuge of her shabby room. She and her mother had one evening frock between them, and it had been packed into her trunk for the great enterprise. It was home-made and of black satin; rather scant. Fortunately, there were few occasions when Lulham dressed for the evening, but when such occasions had arisen, mother and daughter had never been able to grace them together. When Mrs. May wore the frock, she hung an old bertha of real lace around the décollétage. When Sonia wore it, the bertha was absent, not that this slight deception ever really deceived Lulham. As well as the business of sharing the frock, she and her mother shared what was always known at Lulham Cottage as the evening wrap. It was a little white cashmere thing renovated from the time when a grandmother had worn it. Now this had to do its best over the black frock, while Sonia thought of Ramonde and her smart perfection. But the excitement of the occasion eased her disappointment over her own appearance, just as excitement used to carry her through the very occasional dances and festivities in Lulham, when she dressed worse than all the other girls who flocked in from the neighbourhood, and when a dreamy mother always cried in reply to protests: "Oh, but, darling, you look perfectly sweet; and so girlish."

As she let herself into the big house in Hilton Square again, Barton met her.

"Sir Hugo asks that you will go to the library, miss. I will serve cocktails there."

She went into the familiar room trying to feel more of a guest than a secretary, and found Hugo Dercham in dinner clothes, walking about his paved garden.

"Splendid," he said, coming forward to meet her. "It is very nice to have you." The irony and the weariness and the bitterness had dropped out of his voice, and he seemed different.

"Is Mr. Selwinn coming ?" she asked, not only for something to say, but because that afternoon she really had hoped that Selwinn would make a third at dinner.

"Francis ?" he repeated. "No, why ?" Then a tinge of the old irony came back into his voice. "Do you want him ?"

"I didn't mean that," she said confusedly. "I just thought that he always seems to cheer you up ; and that must be good for you."

He laughed shortly. She couldn't quite read the meaning of that laugh, and he knew that she couldn't. "If she only knew," he thought, "if she only knew the real reason why Francis haunts this house like a twelve-stone ghost !"

Barton came in with his cocktails.

"Have one now," Dereham said. "You were not among the alcoholics earlier on."

For the second time in her life she had a cocktail, and again, because she did not like them, she sipped it very slowly, with obvious caution.

"That is the way to make even one cocktail dreadfully efficacious," he said, watching her. "They are to be drunk quickly, you know."

"I have only had one before in my life," she answered, "so I don't know."

"And where was that?" Dereham asked.

She felt that the reason for her dismay at that question was foolish and undignified. Selwinn had put her in a false position by telling her so carefully not to mention their first meeting to his cousin. Why should she be secretive? Why should she not be frank and open in all her dealings with Hugo Dereham? It was entirely inconsistent with the simplicity of her ideas of right and wrong that she should deceive him even in the smallest particular, so she said, partly disregarding Selwinn's injunctions:

"I had one at the Savoy, but it wasn't strong, like this."

"I thought you were going to say the great experience occurred last night," he said, rather mockingly, "when you went down to that country club."

"No, Sir Hugo; I don't like them, you see. I am not used to them, but I did have one at the Savoy," she repeated.

He saw her hesitation.

"I am glad you have friends to take you out," he said, but his voice was not glad; it was faintly displeased and impatient; and his light-grey eyes darkened.

She demurred:

"I don't know any one in London, except the people I have met through you."

He was quiet for a moment, as if he thought that out; then didn't care; and put it away from him.

"I suppose," he persisted, nevertheless, "you must be thinking that is none of my business, but I love interfering sometimes. Beastly of me, isn't it? And actually sometimes I love annoying people just to please myself. I expect you've noticed it?"

That was a question that she could answer truthfully, and she did.

"Yes, I have noticed."

He laughed outright at her.

"And I suppose," he went on, "that you have already hated me for it."

"Not hated," she hesitated.

"Well, what then?" he said sardonically. "Pitied me? Good heavens, girl, don't do that!"

"Oh, I wouldn't pity you, Sir Hugo, except——"

He broke in: "Never dare to pity me." His laugh lightened the sudden harsh burr in his voice. He explained: "I loathe pity, and I loathe sympathy, Miss May. Well, let me now try to annoy you. Let us go on talking about this first cocktail. What a mighty experience! When did you go through the ordeal?"

"The first morning I arrived," she said coolly, not laughing with him, and really being obliged to make an effort now not to hate him a little for his love of torment.

What should he care?

"You thought you would have a bracer," he suggested, "before meeting me?"

So suddenly she flung the answer down before him as if it were a gauge of battle.

"Mr. Selwinn met me and very kindly took me to luncheon. I don't think you knew, Sir Hugo."

As he looked down at her, so little and young and fair, that inexplicable anger that he had felt before concerning her rushed over him again; and he tried to be at pains not to show it. "I'm a mass of irritations," he thought.

"So that was it?" he said. "What a to-do about nothing."

"You made the to-do, Sir Hugo."

He thought: "She's answering back now like a spirited small child. She is irritated, too."

"So I did," he said aloud, "I have told you just now I love making difficulties. It's my only form of exercise

at present. I give you a lot to put up with, don't I, Miss May ? "

She must remember that this was a sick man.

" Not too much," she smiled.

He took her glass from her. It was still more than half-full, and he put it down on his big writing-table.

" You don't like it," he said. " Don't have it. Show the courage of your convictions, my dear child. I know it takes a lot of courage to confess to being so good, but you should own up honestly even to that atrocity."

Barton was on the threshold announcing dinner, and she preceded Dereham out of the library. Yes ; she was an honoured guest. That little gesture of his which reminded her that to-night there was no standing back of the secretary, the employer to move first, proclaimed that small yet gratifying fact to her, and over Barton's rigid face there seemed to flit the shadow of a smile as she went by him, to sit on Hugo Dereham's right hand, at the most beautiful dining-table she had ever seen.

" You've got iced lemonade for Miss May, haven't you, Barton ? "

" Yes, Sir Hugo ? "

" There you are, Miss May," Dereham said gravely. " I shan't tease you any longer about the things you don't like."

She did not mind what he did when he lapsed into this easier humour. They began to eat an exquisite dinner. She kept trying to guess at the ingredients of delicious and complicated dishes, so that she could describe them in a letter home to-morrow, but even supposing that she managed a recipe, the two dreamers down there wouldn't enjoy it any more than they enjoyed their nightly buttermilk and home-made cake. Each other's company was feast enough. It was each other's company which they savoured like epicures, and had done for

twenty-two tireless long years that must have been all too short. For a moment while she pictured them, they were so clearly before her that they might have been here in this room, watching her.

That, however, conjured up her mother's greatly sentimental and expectant letters, and estranged her again from the man at the head of the table.

But, in a moment, he began to talk easily and interestingly, about books, plays, travel. So he made an hour pass by on wings, and then Barton had left the room and they were alone with the windows open to the paved garden, the fountain tinkling, dusk falling, and only light from the candles in the high silver candelabra lighting up the beautiful glow of nectarines and peaches, and turning the wine in Dereham's glass into liquid rubies. Then there was a little pause.

" Now," he said, " Miss May, you're going to think again, aren't you, over your decision this afternoon? This house is so big that we surely should never get on each other's nerves. I should very seldom even worry you to dine down here unless you wanted to, although most nights I am in by my doctor's orders, and, you know, all such nights I am quite alone."

She was distressed all over again. " You make me feel terribly selfish, Sir Hugo."

" Why," he persisted, " must you value so much what you call freedom, because you won't be any more free at the end of a telephone wire than you would be actually in the house ? "

" It is not that," she said slowly.

" Then you must be thinking of what Miss Allett said just before she left. Tell me."

" It is not entirely because of Miss Allett, Sir Hugo."

How he insisted !

" Well, then, tell me ! Tell me ! Is it that you think her attitude is the attitude of the whole world ? Do you

really think that all these stupidities which some people love to utter on purpose to hurt others would occur to every one, child ? "

Yet, as he demanded it, he knew perfectly well that all Ramonde Allett had said, and more, would be in the minds and on the malicious tongues of ninety per cent. of his friends and acquaintances. " When one comes to think of it, he mused to himself, even servants might have something to say. . . ." Only, with servants one never heard what they thought, or saw it either, if they knew their job, and it was different.

Oh ! he could not be thwarted and hindered !

This girl was a good worker, she was an amazing worker, quiet and quick, and sympathetic ; intuitive and well read and intelligent.

" Come, Miss May, this is a business proposition. I suppose you know that." He paused. " I am sorry to put it to you like this," he went on, striving for a courtesy which he found it difficult to keep in the fever of his impatience ; " but you know this job really suits you just as well as you suit me."

" It is lovely ! " she said under her breath.

" Well, then, you don't want to lose it ? "

" Of course not, Sir Hugo."

" You're satisfied with pay, with prospects ? Well, I know you must be," he said plainly, " for I have made the thing as tempting as possible in view of my——" And again he paused, and looked at her, and said very slowly, " imperative need."

" I can't tell you how much I appreciate everything," she said nervously.

" Well, if it is not Miss Allett who intimidates you," he said, harshly again, " what is it ? For heaven's sake come out with it. Is it my cousin Francis ? Is he holding out the bait of hectic evenings, or evenings that seem hectic to a country girl like you ? Do you want this

freedom to go swimming by moonlight with Francis; or dancing; or what?"

"No, no, Sir Hugo. I wish I could explain," she said desperately. "It is partly Miss Allett."

"A lot of fuss for a small problem," he said mockingly, but he saw it was not a small problem to this girl. He suffered and suppressed rampant irritation while he watched her tell-tale face.

She could not tell him about those silly letters—lovely letters in a way, of course, because her mother's dreams and hopes always had a quality of loveliness that divested them entirely of any mundane reasons, although one knew that sophisticated people wouldn't believe it.

She was urgently conscious of wanting to take as little as she could from Sir Hugo Dereham, to encroach as little as possible, to serve him as well as possible and to help him because he was a sick man.

"You're far too sensitive, Miss May," he said shortly. "It would help me so much to have you here in the house, as I have said before. Did Mrs. Roberts show you what would be your quarters if you came?"

"Yes, the rooms are perfect."

"You're easily pleased," he said in rather a softer voice. Then he went on. "You will force me, I suppose, to tell you the real truth. The fact is . . ." And then again there was one of those long pauses while he looked at her quietly. He put out his hand and patted hers, and kept it covered with his hand for a moment. "Don't be frightened," he said, "though to the young, I dare say, the thing seems a little bit grim, but the fact is, I am in a hurry to get that piece of work done because I never have left anything I have undertaken unfinished. This work is especially dear to me, and, unfortunately, in not many months now I have to die."

He removed his hand. "*And don't pity me,*" he cried.

But she was overwhelmed with pity and horror. She

had not imagined anything so terrible, and devastating. It swept away, of course, all other considerations. The only person who mattered now was Dereham himself. She could not refuse any request that he could possibly make of her, and while all this rushed through her mind she sat quite still, quite mute, afraid of crying.

"Mind," he said in a quite ordinary voice, "it is our secret."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Only Francis knows besides ourselves," he added.

She found it very difficult to find voice to ask almost in a whisper:

"Doesn't Mrs. Roberts know, and Barton?"

"I think they suspect," he said briefly; "but I do not care for mourning faces. I hate them. So I have known better than to let any one see anything."

She had not the least idea that tears were pouring down her cheeks, until one splashed humiliatingly on the table.

"Oh, my dear child," he protested, but he made no movement to take her hand again. He let her sit there crying quietly.

"I hate tears as much as pity," he said.

"I am so sorry to be crying! She found her handkerchief and dried her eyes. They shone at him like stars and her cheeks were flushed, but her mouth settled very firmly.

"Sir Hugo, of course I will come, of course I will be at your disposal. I will move in to-night. Then," she said nervously, "we could work long hours; couldn't we?"

"Splendid," he said quietly, just as he had said when two hours ago she had come into the library in that queer little black dress. He had conquered this little citadel! He rang the bell. "I suppose you wouldn't mind the housemaid packing your things at once, or would you like me to ask Mrs. Roberts to go over?"

He was triumphant; used to ruling and over-ruling.

"It does not matter a bit."

She nearly cried his shocked thought: "Nothing matters except you."

"Barton," said Dereham, turning to the butler who stood by him, "ask Mrs. Roberts to arrange to have Miss May's things packed and brought here to-night, and tell her that Miss May is settling into the flat upstairs, and tell that club place, that hostel place, to send in their bill here."

The servant went out.

"Now," Dereham said, "as you say, we'll work for longer hours. You will have to look upon that as a necessity. You'll soon understand. You've seen me at my best since you've been here, unappealing as that best may seem to you."

She thought of that night so recently, when she had found him lying helpless and ill, half-in, half-out of the library windows. "At his best?" she inquired of herself. "I shall have to be prepared for much more than that! Shall I?" She trembled over it. *"I will help him."*

"Two or three times during the last three months," he said conversationally, "I had to have a couple of nurses with me, day and night. That is a horrible nuisance, I can tell you. The last few weeks I have been a bit better. Sometimes when I get bad days, when work is really impossible, I could work by night if I only had somebody who would sit up with me. I suppose I am going to make you be that some one. You'll be called upon at all hours, rung up in the middle of your beauty sleep, and I shall expect you to dress and come down. You'll be prepared for all that?"

"Absolutely," she cried resolutely.

He looked at her carefully, and those light-grey eyes of his seemed gradually to become warm; a fire glowed behind them. "She is all right," he thought. Admiration

crept into his mind; and more; he could again feel that ridiculous thrill at outwitting competition for this pretty girl. He was always swift as lightning to analyse his own motives as well as the motives of other people, and he was impatient with himself even of thinking of such a word "competition." Who competed? Selwinn, his cousin? "A hell of a lot of men might compete," he thought, "but why should I think that I would, except that I need her so?"

"We can understand each other?" he said at last, quite callously; but something in his voice begged her to reassure him.

"Most *perfectly*," she promised. She had grown very pale now, and her eyes were large, like the eyes of a wonder-struck child, that gazed awesomely at a catastrophe bigger than any previously imagined.

"You're horror struck," he said lightly. "Poor girl." He opened a cigarette box and pushed it near her. "I am forgetting my duty as host in the thrill of this macabre conversation," he gibed.

"I don't smoke, thank you."

The sweet one! . . . No. It was nonsense to think like that.

He took a cigarette himself, and lighted it. His hands were perfectly steady, and there came to Sonia the memory of how, at the first interview with him, she had noticed those hands, large, fine and strong; the hands of great accomplishment, very resolute.

With a glance at her, he said, as if reading her mind:

"I don't count as an invalid, you know."

It was what she was thinking herself. For it was curious, it was very hard indeed, to imagine this man as an invalid; impossible, even now, to think of him enfeebled, laid low; with finality. He had appeared to her even from the first moment, as she knew now, to be a man who could surmount anything.

The tragedy struck upon her more forcibly.

"Shall we work to-night?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "I think we will. It is one of my good times, and staying awake does not worry me. I suffer," and he laughed that away, "I mean to say I am inconvenienced a good deal by insomnia, anyway. Whenever you're ready, Miss May, we'll work right on."

"I am ready at once."

The trunk was brought in from the hostel, it was unpacked, her rooms were ready, her night things laid out, the lights turned on in that upstair flat, but she superintended none of this. Midnight struck, one o'clock, two, three o'clock; and at four, with Hugo Dereham, she saw the lovely dawn. He pulled the curtains aside, and said to her, "Look! the sun!" as if he loved it. She guessed with an agonising clarity that he would not see enough dawns. He grudged the moments of oblivion.

Strange night.

Ten o'clock, however, found her back at work, though now, as usual, in the small office room before the typewriter. She had sheaves of material garnered during the night, and she set herself the task of finishing it all during this summer day. As usual Barton came in with a particularly delicate luncheon. He brought, too, a slender half-bottle of hock which he had iced "just enough," he said, "and not too much. Sir Hugo rather hopes you will try this, miss." But she did not want it; she did not really want anything except to get that mass of work completed, and then to begin again.

"I hope we are not overworking you, miss," said Barton, lingering.

"You couldn't," said Sonia, "I am as strong as a horse," not knowing how little and fair and delicate and tired she looked. There were smudges under her

eyes, and no colour at all in her cheeks. "How is Sir Hugo?" she asked solicitously.

"Surprisingly well, miss," said Barton gladly. "He got three hours' nice sleep before his breakfast, and has been out riding in the park this morning. I am afraid three hours sleep is more than you've had, miss. I rather infer, miss, if you'll excuse me guessing, that it's been a long session."

"Yes, Barton"—she nodded gravely, but enthusiastically—"it was."

"I hope you took some refreshment, miss?"

"I went down to the kitchen at five, and made Sir Hugo some coffee."

"Did you indeed, miss?" The servant looked at her curiously.

"We needed it," she added, rather proudly.

"But then you know, miss," he said, "you should have done what Sir Hugo did, and gone to bed."

"I was afraid I should sleep too late if I did," she confessed.

"And Mrs. Roberts wouldn't have had you called either,' said Barton. "I expect you know that, miss."

"I guessed it."

"I hope you will enjoy your lunch, miss."

He went out.

So Dereham had been out riding? She could hear him saying: "I do not count as an invalid." It was magnificent of him, she thought, as she worked on all through the increasing heat of the afternoon. Now and again she wondered if he would look in, or send her any other message than the one at luncheon, about the wine she would not drink, but she did not so much as get a glimpse of him. She began to feel a naïve, troubled surprise, because through the long hours when she had worked with him last night, there had grown up in her a feeling that this was almost like a partnership. Strange

then, that the partner should so coldly disappear, and for so long! It was heartless!

But at five o'clock Barton stood there again.

"Sir Hugo will be glad if you will go to the drawing-room as before, miss. We'll have several callers." She went up to her flat first; those shut off rooms at the very top of this house, where only the highest boughs of the trees in the square looked in, were divinely quiet. She changed her frock hurriedly for a clean one, regretful that this was all she could do, that she had no lovely cunning clothes like the women downstairs would be wearing, but only just a very limited succession of home-made, much washed linens and cottons. She put on a little blue dress with a white belt and blue summer sandals that had been a summer's sensation among the girls in Lulham; and went downstairs. It was because of her fatigue that, as she opened the door of the big drawing-room, she flinched specially, to-day, from the babel of talk which surged about her like the waves of a sea, but the big tea-table in one corner invited her with a familiar friendly gesture of its winking silver, and she slipped unobtrusively across the room to her seat behind the tray.

Once again most of the people were strangers, but very soon Ramonde Allett again came in, and again Selwinn was with her, and to-day Ramonde had more than ever her usual air of saying silently: "Of course this is practically my house, my home, my man." She went up instantly to Dereham, and held him talking. A friend had reported that he had been seen out riding in the park, and she reproached him. He was disobeying orders! She called people to witness to his stupidity and his recklessness because: "Of course, you've got a heart, Hugo. He has really got a heart," she appealed to people near them, "although," she said laughingly, "I know these heavy Empire builders hate

owning to anything so trivial. Still, after all, you look splendid, Hugo." She scanned him very closely. "Doesn't he, Francis?" And Selwinn agreed casually. "He looks grand."

Selwinn's eyes roamed to the corner of the room where the girl in the blue frock sat. "It is more than little Miss May does, Hugo," he said. "She doesn't look grand. By jove, London is a little hard on country maidens."

"The girl looks like a bit of chewed string," said Ramonde, staring in her turn. But Dereham slighted their careless solicitude.

"Oh, well, she has had a hardish time of it; she worked all through yesterday, and we worked all through the night," he said, his eyes, very cold, meeting Ramonde's, "and I don't think she has stopped tapping that infernal typewriter, poor girl, the whole of to-day."

"What do you mean—all through the night?" said Ramonde, and she began, as Selwinn put it to himself, absolutely to glitter. When she is angry she simply glitters, he always said of her.

"I mean what I say," said Dereham impatiently, "all through the night. We saw the dawn break together—it was quite romantic, Ramonde. For me, of course, I mean. And she made me some darned good coffee at five. You certainly found me a wonderful secretary, Francis."

He was just faintly uneasy about it all; not uneasy for himself, but for that quiet, pale girl looking like love-in-the-mist away on the other side of the room.

Yet he could not help tormenting Ramonde with these things. He wanted to displease her and all her kind, just as she and all her kind displeased him with their hardness, with their garishness, and their effete vulgarities.

"Did you hear Hugo?" said Ramonde in a high-

pitched voice to the little group that had closed around them. " Isn't he the complete sheik ? He keeps the most beautiful girl-secretary in London sitting up all night with him and then she has to pour out tea and receive callers, and preserve that schoolgirl complexion, or boss will fire her before she knows where she is, poor babe ! "

Sonia did not hear that, but she saw every man look her way, and wondered. Two women looked too, with their casual, not too friendly, glances.

" If I were your secretary, Hugo," Ramonde went on, " and had to do all that for you, I would not live in some miserable hen-run. I should expect all sorts of trappings and trimmings."

" Miss May doesn't live any more in a hen-run," Dereham said lazily : and that was stupid too, and he knew it, but he had again begun to get a little tired. Physical irritation overcame his rigid sense of prudence. " She is living here."

" She is living here ? " Ramonde echoed.

" Taken up quarters at the top of the house," said Dereham briefly. " You know perfectly well I've a self-contained bachelor flat there, and I want to be able to call on her at any time."

" To call on her at any time ? " cried Ramonde, with lifted eyebrows. Of course that was entirely, wilfully wicked of her ! She knew what he meant, " and want to call upon my secretary's services at any time," was what he should have said to be on the safe side. Confound Ramonde and her quick *doubles entendues*, and her laughter, and her anger, and her jealousy, and her spite ! Now he knew within five minutes that in that room a web of small scandal was slowly being weaved about that love-in-the-mist girl who had thrown herself so gamely into his cause all last night.

He had been a brute, and he knew it. The whole

day he had not even gone near her, irritably thinking to himself, that she might be a little uppish over all this, that she might need keeping in her place. How dared he have such thoughts? He was unwillingly ashamed; and furious, not only with Ramonde and her crew, but with himself.

"Hugo," said Ramonde then, "Francis and I thought we would dine here, and then carry you off to John's new play. You haven't seen it yet?"

It was Selwinn who tactfully forestalled Dereham's flat refusal.

"Nothing of the kind. You know perfectly well Ramonde, that I am taking you to dine at a very art-for-arts-sake studio, where the food will poison you, and the vodka will burn your insides; and where there will be no need of a binge. And whether we ever get to John's play is entirely uncertain."

Dereham did not listen. He was aware of a sharp determination in his mind that, come what might, neither Ramonde nor Selwinn was going to dine there that night. He made his way over to the tea-table, and his sharpened perceptions showed all that went on in the big babbling room.

He was aware with some extra sense, that—strangely for him—was all kind and chivalrous, not only compassionate, but curiously passionate, that he saw before him a very unhappy and bewildered girl, a girl who might as well have been stoned by that rabble—so, contemptuously, he thought of them—as have had to bear the running commentary of their looks and words, and laughs, and their ribald constructions of innocent things which had rippled, as it were, right up to the tea-table, and washed over her like an encroaching sea.

"Good-afternoon, Miss May," he said deliberately, "you look tired."

"No, Sir Hugo, not a bit." And indeed she was not

tired now. She was gathering strength, all fired to fight this strange unkindness and hostility; this half-derision which met and shocked her.

"These people are all going soon," he said, in quite a loud voice. He was regardless of who heard him or what effect it had upon them; indeed he had no regard for anybody in the room at that moment except for her. There was, of course, his liking for his cousin Francis, but that was all; and there was no need to show good manners to this mannerless crowd, nearly all anybody's friends but his. He looked round swiftly. Barton was retiring with a tray of collected empty cocktail glasses, and Dereham gave him an open sign to bring no more.

"The bar's dry," he said, still in the same raised voice, still scoffingly regardless of nice manners. He went up to Selwinn, laid a hand on his shoulder, and said:

"Just bung all your people out for me, old man, will you? I don't know what you and Ramonde want to collect them here for."

"But Hugo," Ramonde began breathlessly, in his ear, "surely I have a right!"

"Right?" he echoed. "Right? What right, my dear?"

And Selwinn said readily:

"Come on Ramonde, and let us take the Murrays along with us, and Kitty and Billy and all. Come along to the grandest studio party ever; consider yourselves all invited to crash in."

Curious people, Sonia thought, scornfully watching their exit, as she stood behind the table waiting politely for the few leave takings and hand shakes that might come her way. It seemed to her a miracle that suddenly the room was clear, and she was alone with Dereham.

He was a very different Dereham now.

"Don't sit on that hard chair; come here." He threw a few cushions together on a chesterfield. She came over

to the couch obediently, but did not sit down. Barton and the parlourmaid, by the same magic as that which had cleared the room, seemed to have taken away all the tea things and the cocktail glasses, and an exhausted peace descended upon it. In reality she was a little too tired exactly to see the sequence of all those ordinary things happening, and she saw the metamorphosis rather dazedly.

" I'm afraid you've been worried this afternoon," Hugo said, deliberately achieving a calm voice that should effect some comfort. For the girl was not calm. She, too, was trying to steady her voice as she said:

" Sir Hugo, I will stay willingly until you can replace me satisfactorily."

" Replace you ? " he repeated. He thought : " I couldn't replace her," and would not so much as reason with himself the why and wherefore.

She nodded. " Because I'd rather go—I'd rather go, quite honestly, Sir Hugo, I couldn't stay. They—they defeat me." And still, of course, she could not tell him of her mother's romantic prophecies ; which with Ramonde's unkind scepticisms, and the scandal lingering this afternoon, had at last seemed to bring this thing to a crescendo.

" They defeat me," she repeated ; " perhaps I'm a coward. . . . I don't seem able to bear just that."

" Sonia," said Dereham, " I couldn't replace you. You don't know the sheer effort, the almost impossible effort it would be to me to hand over the work you've done so well and which you've begun to understand so wonderfully, to some nit-wit." He broke off. " I don't ask for your pity," he said. He walked away ; and recovered himself, and came back.

" Sit down," he said, but still she stood. " I know," he said, " that I am rather a fool to put a girl like you into this position ; it cannot be done. I see it. It's

because you are you, rather a special girl. It's been wrong of me, but all I was thinking of was the work, and all I am going to think of in the future is the work. If it is just a question of scandal——" He paused. "And there will be a lot of scandal," he thought grimly, "the little seeds sown in this room this afternoon will multiply all over London, at least all the London that I know, within a week. Yes, there will be a damnable lot of scandal. I oughtn't ask a girl like this to face it. The women'll simply give her hell. Blast them. . . ."

He walked about.

"I wish you'd sit down yourself," she ventured.

He disregarded it.

"Sonia," he said suddenly, "you're a brave girl, really, aren't you?"

For an idea had come to him; not so fantastic as at first flash it seemed. Didn't men, for their stomachs' sakes, sometimes marry their cooks? Why not for Fennimore's sake——?

"You're brave, aren't you?" he repeated.

"I don't know," she said weakly, "perhaps I am not so brave after all. There are certain things I can face . . . this hurts too much. . . . I'd rather go."

"You cannot go." His face brooked no contradiction. "That's decisive. And you're not a coward. You've helped finely up till now. I say, you're a brave girl; take a risk that is not a risk, Sonia, it will all be so soon over. Don't fail me, I have got to keep you near me because of the work. Will you marry me?"

CHAPTER VI

"I COULDN'T possibly marry you," Sonia said headily.

"Please sit down," he insisted again.

This time she obeyed him, and sank in the corner of the chesterfield, though she would rather have run away. But the luxurious ease of the couch was tremendously grateful to her now almost overwhelming fatigue. Dereham sat down a little way from her, speaking quite coolly and quietly, his eyes never leaving her face, and while he spoke he went on re-experiencing thoughts of which, again, he was more than a little ashamed before her candid distress, and yet which, his cynicism reminded him, were perfectly logical.

She had made a sudden outcry against his offer of marriage, but, whispered his cynicism, this girl cannot mean it. It isn't really a favour you are asking, but an honour you are conferring.

As a man of ordinary decency and modesty, in spite of his arrogance in other ways, he would have been the first to condemn himself for a piece of fatuous conceit, but that once again he knew the whole world would have judged with one voice: "It's true."

"I haven't given you time to think," he said quietly, "but I want you to listen to me, please, Miss May . . . And just for this moment, if not afterwards, it will seem more natural to call you Sonia, won't it?"

What did a mere trifle of names matter?

"If you wish," she said breathlessly, "but . . ."

He interrupted her:

"I want your help," he said, "I know I am full of whims, although I keep on repeating again and again I don't want your pity; however, you have shown me

in the last two or three days that you're fairly necessary if I have to do what I want to do in the prescribed time. I repeat and repeat this, Sonia. So I am quite seriously asking you to be my wife. You see, even to a man obsessed on one subject, as no doubt you think I am, it is quite clear that I should be putting you into a very anomalous position if you just took up quarters here as my secretary; with me at all hours of the day and night; and, as a matter of fact, more often night, because then, though I can't sleep, I am sometimes at my best. And I quite see that what happened this afternoon must have made it most indecently clear to you too. All those people have the most shocking manners, but worse than bad manners, my dear Sonia, so many of them have bad hearts; and bad souls if you like to go further. And yet we have to notice what they say!" He made an angry gesture. "No, don't speak; just listen.

"You've talked with my housekeeper Mrs. Roberts; well, old Roberts has been with me since I first came down from the University. She knew me as a schoolboy, and so she knew she was quite welcome to the liberty she took to-day, when she asked to speak to me after breakfast and said:

"The young lady's much too pretty, I am afraid, Sir Hugo. I am afraid it won't seem quite *comme il faut.*"

He laughed, though Sonia could see no fun in it. She was too troubled.

"Old Roberts loves her bit of French," he said, "she learnt it from a maid my mother once had."

He paused and looked searchingly at her again.

"Are you thinking about things a little bit, Sonia?"

"I can hardly think," she murmured, "it is too difficult."

"It is not difficult at all," he said impatiently, trying

to master that touch of arrogance which would creep in when any one opposed his urgent wishes. "The matter will be simplicity itself. You may trust me for that, and Sonia, I will tell you quite explicitly my terms. You may make yours if you like. Listen. You'll live here, or perhaps we shall go down to Fennimore for just a week or two, if these infernal doctors let me. We shall work together just the same, but you'll be Lady Dereham, and any one whose manners don't please you will be sent out of this house, never to come back any more. I include Miss Allett," he said dryly, "although it is not exactly that she has wanted to be cruel to you personally. It is not that she dislikes you." He could not bring himself to say, "It's because she wants me," though once again cynicism presented that very clearly to him. He was unable to help knowing the embarrassing truth.

He went on: "As I say, we shall work together just the same as we work now. You'd have a great deal at your disposal, the whole house, cars, servants, *carte blanche* for clothes, my dear." Now he watched her again steadily. "A title—for what it's worth; and on my death," she looked back fascinated into those eyes which seemed to grow colder and steadier, and more and more incapable of belief in any human being, "you would have a little annuity, very, very small. You wouldn't be a rich widow, though you would be quite justified in assuming you would be. The money is a good deal tied up. I should leave you perhaps £150 a year from my private estate, and you would have £500 in capital."

She sprang up; putting her hands over her ears.

"I don't want to hear, Sir Hugo!" she cried urgently. "I simply don't want to hear!"

He was conscious, as he rose formally too, without taking his eyes from her, of a tremendous desire surging

in him ; a desire to believe this girl, to believe that she didn't want what he offered, and that she wasn't already collecting her wits and playing for more. Because the dower he had promised must seem to her unreasonably and ludicruously small. Suddenly he put out his hands, took her wrists and forced her own hands away from her ears to that they stood very close together, looking into each other's eyes. She had to put her head back, and look up to him. It seemed a long while and he became very conscious of how slight and fragile this girl was. His thoughts were momentarily chaotic, and again he had to rule them. Apart from those intruding and irrelevant desires for belief which threatened to sway him, his mind was still set resolutely on the dire necessity of his work. She must remain. No other would do as well. He knew indubitably that she would be a very loyal and faithful guardian of all that he gave her to undertake and to care for ; no matter what rewards she might think it natural to ask.

" Sonia," he said hoarsely, " help me."

His hands were hurting her wrists. At first she had not felt the hurt as they stood gazing at each other spellbound, but now she winced and made a little involuntary murmur.

" Do I hurt you ? " he said quickly. A flush crept up under his bronzed skin and his fingers loosened. " Sit down again, child," he said.

She sat down once more in the corner of the chesterfield, and now he seated himself near her in the corner opposite. There was only a very short space of billowing cushions between them.

" Is it really the only way, Sir Hugo ? " she asked, as if helplessly marvelling.

" It is the only way," he said, " to solve this problem quickly and without more trouble than I can afford to take. I cannot be very spendthrift with my trouble,

Sonia." She saw him lean back suddenly as if stricken by mortal weariness, and she was instantly afraid for him again.

"You're not ill?"

"No," he said, "I am not going to be ill, but all this is wasting one's strength, Sonia."

She said quietly:

"I suppose part of the doctor's treatment is to order that you mustn't ever be worried?"

"Well, that is part of such treatment as they think it is still worth while giving," he acknowledged.

She took the plunge breathlessly:

"I will marry you if it helps."

"Thank you very much, my dear," he said gravely, and then he laughed. Did ever a bride give, with more simplicity so banally sweet a reason for what should be the most passionate relation of all?

"Don't laugh," she cried out.

"Why not? Let's laugh a little, Sonia. What is the matter?"

"Oh," she said rather wildly, "I can't pretend it's a joke. It seems to me so serious—*so serious*," she repeated.

"Only, as I've said before," he assured her quietly, "it won't last long."

What was it in her that made her suddenly think: "I wish it would—I wish it were for a long lifetime!" Was it a little of her mother's dreamy quality betraying itself in her daughter? She found herself shaken with a longing to be able to be more than just secretary-wife to Dereham. It was a cold, strange affair for a girl—all this! It wasn't as she expected courtship and marriage to be; and she knew now, deep down in her, that she had expected courtship and marriage from life, little as she had ever admitted it to her parents. Those fairy book discussions of the subject, at Lulham Cottage, had

always too much offended her modern sense of reticence. What would they think now when she told them that exactly what they had hoped and prophesied for her had already come true? But she would not be able to tell them the reason—she would not be able to tell them that her husband didn't love her, that he looked upon her just as a means to an end, and that she had married him out of compassion; with no thrill for what would seem, to Lulham, such a grand position, for the houses and the money, the cars and the clothes.

The next moment Dereham was speaking of her parents just as if he had read her thoughts.

"You won't feel it necessary to ask your mother's permission?" And his incorrigible mind assured him sardonically, "That would very readily be given."

She shook her head.

"I think perhaps I won't tell them at all until . . ." then she stopped, and a wave of colour ran over her face and neck. The marriage was to be immediate, wasn't it? Yet she didn't like to say "until we are married."

Dereham finished it for her.

"Until we are married," he said, in a practical voice. "I quite agree with you, they would not quite understand our terms perhaps, would they, Sonia, and a great deal of rejoicing is out of the question, isn't it?"

She nodded, and hoped that the lump in her throat would disappear before she had to speak again.

"I shall ring up my lawyers this evening," he said. "I think I can catch one of them at home; then to-morrow—you won't feel I am rushing you, will you?—we shall be married."

"But people cannot get married just like that!"

"Oh yes," said Dereham, "a rich bridegroom who is an urgent medical case may arrange things just like that, my dear." He stood up. "We ought to dress,"

he said, " we'll dine early, and we'd better turn in early, child. I shouldn't dream ot working you again to-day after all the hours you put in last night."

" But isn't that what I'm marrying you for, so that I can work at any time ? "

Although he knew it to be true, the question startled and touched him strangely. He looked down at her, still looking very remote from him, in her corner of the big couch.

" It sounds rather brutal, doesn't it ? " he said, " but I shall try to see that you are quite happy, Sonia, and to arrange things, as far as possible, as you like them. I'm trusting you quite a lot, don't you see ? "

" Are you ? "

" Well," he said, " it isn't every girl I could take such a risk with."

" And I ? My part ? My risk ? "

Her cry startled him. " I'm sorry," he said, " sorry. I was just telling you how it might be if . . . you weren't you. I apologise."

" Thank you," she whispered.

A tinge of irony in that seemingly so transparent mind? He considered her. " I apologise," he said again. " You won't run any risk, Sonia. When, for a very little while, you are mine "—but it was mad to let the sentiment of the moment ride, and he subdued it—" I shall look after you," he finished.

" Go on with what you were saying—explaining."

He wanted to justify himself very fully ; so he went on deliberately :

" Some girls, as soon as they become Lady Dereham, would think it quite natural to want to enjoy all the pleasures and the odds and ends that would accrue, then there would be no time for my wife to help me with Fennimore, would there ? I mean to say if she took that view of things ? "

Sonia got up too, and faced him again, looking up.

"But you don't think that I wouldn't keep my part of the bargain, Sir Hugo?"

"Well," he said, "women don't bother much about bargains as far as I've discovered. I believe you to be different though, or I'd never dare risk it. Don't be silly and offended—give every word I'm saying just its value and no more, please. *Please!*"

Perhaps he did not know how mysteriously words could hurt?

"I shall be able to do a lot more for you than before," she promised him quietly, "and I will."

"Thank you, my dear," he said, "but, if you do go back on me—and as I say, many women would—I shall not be much worse off, I suppose, than if you went away from me now, and I lost you like that. I can always leave Lady Dereham to her own devices, and die trying to endure the nuisance of a new secretary all over again!"

She didn't answer that at all. Sometimes he seemed to her so bitter that he was almost unbearable. She wasn't used to bitterness; couldn't understand it. She walked away from him down the long room, longing for the shelter of her own apartments. He was close behind her to open the door; and he watched her cross the hall to the lift, close the gilded gate on herself, and lift her hand to the switch before she ascended. He was noting every movement. He saw her looking at him very gravely through those golden bars, and suddenly he smiled as she had never seen him smile before, and made her a gay little salute. He just caught her startled handwave in return before she was out of sight.

It was time for him to dress too, and his valet would be waiting, but he turned back into the drawing-room, and pressed the bell.

"Ask Mrs. Roberts to come here, Barton."

She came in, and he thought how nice she was, how dear and kind and loyal.

" Sit down, Robby," he said in a special voice that he kept for this faithful soul.

" Thank you, Sir Hugo." She sat down ; very ample ; very comfortable ; all her own personal problems long over.

" Robby," he said, staring aloofly over her head from a distance, " I am getting married." He sensed of the instant watchfulness that settled over her homely features like a veil. " You don't ask to whom ? " he said, after he had waited for the question.

" No, Sir Hugo, although naturally it means a great deal to me."

" And you don't ask me, Robby, why, when I'm under a death sentence—as you've guessed ; and I know you have—well, why should I want to marry at all and turn a bride into a widow almost as soon as the ring is on her finger ? "

" That doesn't seem so strange to me, Sir Hugo," she said. " I have seen how much your coming into Fennimore, all unexpected, has meant to you. You think the world of Fennimore, you're wrapped up in it, and if you're marrying now, why, I'm supposing, Sir Hugo, it is because you think you would like to have a son, even if you can never live to see him. Which I don't believe ! I don't and won't ! "

An heir.

He had never thought, as he looked at Sonia . . .

" No," he said, suddenly harsh, " not at all ; but you're right about me being wrapped up in Fennimore. I am marrying Miss May."

" Thank God," said Mrs. Roberts.

He stared.

" I should not if I were you, Robby. It is quite likely a pretty ungodly thing to do."

She interrupted :

" Oh no, Sir Hugo. Why, you can offer the young lady all sorts of things that I'm sure she has never had before. The young lady is very poor ; it's easy to see."

He thought silently of the meagre proposition he had put to the young lady. He had made it so meagre because he feared and hated the cupidity of women. It was so meagre that after his death people would exclaim : " It's indecent, he might at least have provided for her comfortably until remarriage." How surprised dear old Robby would be if she knew exactly those astonishing terms. " But that's all between Sonia and me," he thought, and the mere bracketing of themselves together like that in his mind brought a queer little stir of emotion.

" Well, Robby," he said, " I'd better go and dress. We shall be married to-morrow."

It seemed impossible to scare or surprise her.

" Will there be a honeymoon, Sir Hugo ? "

" I never thought of it," he said.

" Oh, Sir Hugo ! "

" Perhaps we'll drive down to Fennimore for a day or two," he considered abruptly. " I'd thought of that much ; but not as a . . . honeymoon."

The housekeeper had risen, and lingered as though not quite ready to take dismissal yet. Her eyes said : " I know you. I've known you for a long time. You naughty boy."

" Be very kind to the young lady, Sir Hugo."

" Am I not kind, Robby ? "

" No, Sir Hugo," she said, " you're not, except to those who know you and understand."

" How dare you, Robby, you old tartar ! "

She didn't smile.

Never had he allowed her till now to speak openly about the tragic future ; never had she been, officially,

permitted to know. All the time, she had known; and smiles were hard to come by.

"Of course I don't know how much Miss May understands?" she said questioningly.

"Enough!"

The housekeeper went to the door, but there she paused, and an entirely new thought was expressed on her broad face.

"Is Miss May staying the night here, Sir Hugo?"

"Certainly," he said, "she stayed here last night, didn't she?"

"Oh, but, Sir Hugo, this is the night before the wedding!"

"Well, don't I know it!" he demanded.

"It is not considered *comme il faut*, Sir Hugo, for the bride to be under the same roof as the bridegroom the night before the wedding."

"Gosh, Robby," he cried, "you do know how to behave, don't you?"

"There," she said, "now I've made you laugh, Sir Hugo, but you're laughing at the wrong thing."

"I often do, don't I, Robby?"

"Yes," she assented sternly.

He ceased smiling.

"But, Robby, is it really as serious as that, this little breach of etiquette? I will tell you what I will do. I will put Miss May entirely under your care until two o'clock to-morrow, when we shall be married. Will that do?"

"It is better than nothing," said Mrs. Roberts, "but it isn't really right."

She went away with a slow head shake.

"Perhaps," Dereham said to himself, "it isn't so much of a joke after all. I expect old Robby and Sonia herself are right about that." But he was going to carry it straight through, this business. No wasting of so

much as minutes! Before he went up to dress he shut himself into the library and telephoned his lawyer, and found him at his house. That conversation didn't take long between a man who knew what he wanted, and meant to get it, and the man who knew exactly how to set about matters in the quickest possible way.

By the time Sonia had again put on the funny little black frock, she had seen and talked with Mrs. Roberts, and her heart was happier with the housekeeper's kindness.

"I'm very glad, Miss May. I'm very glad," Mrs. Roberts had repeated over and over again, as if she meant it. She made one feel that this marriage was hardly more surprising to her than it would be to the two darlings at Lulham.

It was heartening to feel that some one was glad. She hoped that all the servants would be glad, that no one would really mind very much, that she would not be thought of as an intruder and a—she remembered finding this word somewhere—gold-digger.

It was sweet to be able to rely on Mrs. Roberts. Sweet even, in prospect, to count upon the credulous raptures of her parents, only somehow she must make them realise that she had not done this for the prince and the palace of their extraordinary imaginations.

How then should she explain it?

Should she say: "We fell in love in three days and could not wait another moment to get married?"

Yes; actually that would be quite simple; and they would gladly believe it.

She hesitated now to meet Hugo again. All the time that they sat at the dinner-table, she would be thinking of to-morrow; and Barton would know, for already Mrs. Roberts would have told him, and there would be a quietly conspiratorial air about him. She wanted him to be pleased too, for he was another friendly soul

in this great house, but could he—would he be pleased? "I can't go down," she thought, and there came to her absurdly enough just such tremor and excitement as preceded a wedding day in a bridal house at Lulham; where the bride and her girl friends held long conferences on the mysteries of marriage, of which they knew simply nothing at all.

Brides' mothers down there were always slightly tearful, and brides' fathers rather truculent. Brothers and sisters, on the other hand, were looking forward to what they intended to make into a good party.

Sonia knew, as she stood by her windows looking down to those deep-green tree-tops, that she was very unlike those infrequent Lulham brides. In spite of the tremors of excitement, her feelings were entirely alien to their feelings, for Dereham had never even kissed her; there had been no courtship, no thrill, no romance.

So there came to her now a vast wonder as to what this wedding was going to mean to her, besides the fact that she could help him so?

She was entering into this most intimate of all conditions with a stranger.

Just as the clock on the bureau, which had a faint chime, struck eight, and she realised she could not put off this business of going down to dinner any longer, an unfamiliar sound sounded through the rooms. It was a telephone bell. She went quickly through into her sitting-room, and saw that a telephone had indeed been installed, a portable device that one could plug in and move from room to room. The device was entirely new to her. She lifted the receiver and heard Mrs. Roberts' comfortable voice. It had an important sound to it now.

"I'm sure, Miss May, that you'd like to dine quietly up in your own rooms, and I have told Sir Hugo so. I shall be up with the tray at any moment now."

"Thank you," Sonia said faintly, and put the receiver back. "Respite," she thought bewilderedly, and remembered that there was to be no work that evening, and perhaps not the next morning either, if they were going to be married at two o'clock. Or perhaps they would work all through the morning and miss the afternoon? It did not occur to her how extraordinarily little she was expecting from this marriage, or to wonder why all her heart was set so ardently upon giving. She was not even expecting a honeymoon; the idea hadn't occurred to her; and only when Mrs. Roberts arrived, full of plans, of which she did not intend to be thwarted, did the bride-elect realise that her attitude was strangely and wistfully unusual.

Mrs. Roberts was followed by the third housemaid carrying a tray. There was champagne in an ice pail, that the housekeeper carried herself.

"I've had the greatest difficulty," she began, "in making Barton let me bring this up myself, Miss May. He does hate a woman handling his wine, but as I told him: 'If you think I'm a stranger to champagne, Mr. Barton, after all these years when you and I have drunk healths and occasions in this house, you must have a very bad memory.' Just put the tray down," she said to the housemaid, "and you may go. I shall look after Miss May myself this afternoon." Look after her she did very thoroughly, waiting upon her, although Sonia begged her to sit down; and talking all the time.

"I spoke to Sir Hugo, Miss May, when I went downstairs again, and I told him that I didn't consider it at all *comme il faut* for you to dine together this evening. He was full of argument, like he always is, and said that quite a lot of his friends did a great deal more than dine together before the wedding day, and that all these old conventions were dying out.

"They have not died out in this house, Sir Hugo,"

I said, and so he just said: "You're a determined old devil, Robby," and let me have my way."

"Can't you at least have some of the champagne?" Sonia begged.

"Thank you very much, Miss May," Mrs. Roberts said, and she produced a second glass from nowhere it seemed, or perhaps as if she had expected this. When it was filled she toasted Sonia very solemnly. "This time to-morrow," she said, "you'll be My Lady. This time to-morrow you won't be dining up here, of course. I know you're tired now, and I know you were kept up nearly all last night working, and that you've worked like a slave all day."

"I'm going to work much more," Sonia said, "when I'm married," and on the word "married" her voice seemed to trail away.

"You're frightened," said Mrs. Roberts quietly. "Don't be, although I'm sure I don't wonder. I can't understand the reasons for all this suddenness, and it's not my place to ask."

"It's because," Sonia began, and paused. Or did the housekeeper share the dreadful secret, or had it been given to her only for her safe keeping? "Sir Hugo has dangerous heart attacks," she said hesitatingly.

"Yes, my dear?" Mrs. Roberts encouraged; correcting herself, "I beg your pardon, Miss May, but you do seem so young and so small, and I'm sure you have not had time to tell your mother, and it does seem as if some older woman ought to be looking after you in some way."

"That's a mistake," said Sonia briefly, "I assure you I look after my mother a great deal more carefully than she looks after me. My mother is just a baby." She smiled. Her fingers were playing with the stem of her champagne glass, and when she looked down into the golden bubbles, she saw visions. She saw her

mother's little fairy face, and her father's fine cut one, and Hugo's steady light eyes looking out from this setting of sunburnt skin. The old life and the new!

She was very pale; her eyes very large and starry with those tired smudges under them—more than ever love-in-a-mist.

The housekeeper watched her tenderly and indulgently, for she and Barton had already said quietly to each other, "Well, whatever the reason is for all this, she is not just an upstart. She doesn't know what it is to grab."

"About Sir Hugo's heart attacks, Miss May," she said diplomatically, "has he told you anything about them?"

"Everything," said Sonia.

"Ah well," said Mrs. Roberts, reflecting that perhaps total confidence between them on this dreaded subject would be out of place on the eve of a wedding day. "Ah well," she repeated, "then you and Barton and myself can understand how everything is."

"I understand," said Sonia a little shakily, "and I am glad if you and Barton understood too. You feel like friends."

"God bless you," said Mrs. Roberts hurriedly, in a low voice, and then she lifted her glass and said cheerily and respectfully: "Well, here's happiness, Miss May, and here's hoping that everything will turn out much better than any of us could possibly expect. I won't say any more about that, because there are other things I've got to ask you; for instance, about your choice of rooms? Sir Hugo said you were to choose what rooms you liked. There's his mother's boudoir, that no lady has ever used since she died, with a beautiful bedroom and bath communicating, and just across the corridor on the same floor is Sir Hugo himself."

"Couldn't I keep this adorable flat?" Sonia cried in dismay.

The housekeeper paused, to volunteer presently:

"It would seem a little bit strange, Miss May."

"He could ring me up," said Sonia, indicating the newly-installed telephone, "any minute of the night he liked. You see he has just had that put in. Don't you think that is the reason?"

"God knows what this is all about," Mrs. Roberts thought to herself, but aloud she said persuasively:

"I don't think that is quite the reason, Miss May. I think it was just to give you an added convenience for the few more hours you'd be wanting this little flat. You see, these rooms used to be Sir Hugo's, as I've told you, when he was a young man, and when he had not got them, well, perhaps old Lady Dereham used to put unimportant guests up here, or just a bachelor guest, or if children and their nurses came to stay, she used to consider this a nursery for them. It is not at all the proper thing for Lady Dereham, and I do hope you'll come down with me when you've finished dinner, and inspect some other rooms, so that I can have everything made ready for you."

"I'd better ask what Sir Hugo wishes," Sonia said, and at that the housekeeper, already amazed, felt that really amazement could go no further. She said very gently and tactfully:

"I should think there would be no doubt as to what Sir Hugo would like."

"You see, I don't know his likes and dislikes," the bride-elect explained.

"She knows nothing!" the housekeeper thought, "nothing!" Adding aloud:

"You had better be near him. I assure you that the rooms old Lady Dereham had are lovely, and of course we can change the furniture just as you like."

"I'll leave it to you," said Sonia, "I'm tired," and all at once she put her face in her hands. She wanted

to shut away the new crowding life; almost to go back to the old.

The housekeeper began to change plates and to busy herself unobtrusively over the table. She was glad, in a moment or two, that she had not cried out her pity and consternation; for this young lady recovered herself gallantly, and looked up.

"At home, you know, Mrs. Roberts, there's such a fuss about weddings; marriage is thought to be such a big thing. I expect I'm taking that part of it too seriously."

"Marriage is a big thing," said Mrs. Roberts, and she thought to herself "that part." I wonder what she thinks she means by "that part." As if she could take it too seriously!"

"I've ordered a *souffle*," she said, taking refuge in gastronomy. "It should be up soon."

"I don't want any more, thank you," Sonia protested, "all I want is to go to bed and to sleep."

"Then you go to bed and sleep," said the housekeeper, solicitously. "You do just whatever you like. Have everything just as you feel inclined to have it, Miss May. A bride should. We're all at your service."

"You're a darling," Sonia said with a little sigh, and she wanted to put her arms round the comfortable woman and lean on her and rest, but not since she was quite a small child, when she thought all grown-ups were naturally strong and wonderful, had she leaned on any one. Fragile as people always seemed to think her, she had been leaned upon. She drank down her second glass of champagne under Mrs. Roberts' persuasion, got up from the table and went into her quiet bedroom. It was retreat—so perfect . . .

"It has been so nice—this little flat," she said through the open door to the housekeeper, who was collecting the things on a tray herself so that no more

intrusions should be made by a third person. "*So nice*—and I've only had it just one day and night." Through the open door Mrs. Roberts spoke back soothingly:

"The other rooms will be much nicer. They'll be lovely, you'll love them. Can I do anything more for you now, Miss May?"

"No, thank you," Sonia answered.

"You look lonely, Miss May." And again she thought as a kind nurse of a stubborn boy child; "It's wrong of him to do it like this. Wrong!"

"I am lonely," said Sonia. And then she shut and bolted the door, disregarding persuasive taps upon it, for she was sobbing.

In two minutes she was in bed, still crying, but because tears are a marvellous narcotic for all overwrought women, she slept the night through.

CHAPTER VII

AGAIN it was Mrs. Roberts who imposed upon herself the task of organising the bride's morning, instead of the third housemaid. She herself stood beside Sonia's bed with the early tea-tray. As she looked down upon he girl just awaking from that long exhausted sleep, she thought to herself as she had thought before, "Why, she is a mere child." She was conscious that it was not of Sonia's years that she was thinking, because, after all, plenty of young ladies with high, sure voices, arrogant manners and a most diverse use of smart slang, no older than this bride, had drifted in and out of the house, especially since Ramonde Allett had achieved for herself so much the effect of hostess—while the duties of hostess never troubled her much. But there was about Sonia

a quality of freshness and youth that, the housekeeper had said to Barton, was just lovely to find in the modern young girl.

Her first words were firm:

"No work this morning, Miss May."

Sonia said sleepily, her mind still bewildered by sleep:

"No work? . . . Why, am I late?"

"You're to be as late as you like this morning," said Mrs. Roberts. "I've already seen Sir Hugo." She put the tray comfortably on the girl's knees. "That's a thing," she added inconsequently, "that I was *very* hurt about," and then seeing that Sonia hardly yet realised the immense importance of this dawn, she reminded her soothingly, "It's your wedding day, Miss May."

The girl flushed, startled into remembrance of it all. She poured out tea with a hand that was not very steady, and sipping it, tried to regain composure.

"But that doesn't at all mean," she said quickly, "that I shan't work this morning!" She began tabulating in her mind conscientiously the details of yesterday's work. She had finished everything that there was to do, and this morning had expected to begin again with Hugo Dereham, taking his dictation.

Of course, it would be very strange . . .

"You see," said Mrs. Roberts, "it's like this, Miss May. I don't often exceed my duty, I hope, but it isn't *comme il faut* for the bridegroom to see the bride on the day of the wedding, before the ceremony. Of course, Sir Hugo wouldn't listen to that, and so I had to persuade him. 'It is *unlucky*, Sir Hugo,' I said, 'and I think perhaps Miss May is a young lady who would care about the old superstitions, and you mustn't make her even think about ill-luck.' That had a very great effect upon Sir Hugo, Miss May."

"Good heavens," Sonia cried, "but it would never have occurred to me."

"Well, Sir Hugo gave in," said Mrs. Roberts hastily. "And you're better resting up here. You must want to write a long letter to your mother, I'm sure, and I only wish she was going to be with you; as it is, Sir Hugo's lawyer, who's coming round to see Sir Hugo this morning on business, will drive you to the registrar's office, and there Sir Hugo will meet you."

"It seems a fuss about nothing," Sonia marvelled.

"Don't call it nothing, my dear," the housekeeper implored.

"Anyway," Sonia said, her heart beating very fast, "if Sir Hugo is having an interview with his lawyer, he probably wouldn't be fit to work as well. I hope he has not got a lot of troublesome business?" she added; and she was quickly concerned about him, not as if she were just his secretary, but as if, already, she had greater duties.

The housekeeper looked at her cautiously.

"Oh, Miss May, I should think Sir Hugo is dealing with the question of settlements in a proper manner; in fact, I am quite sure that he will do everything in a proper manner, when it comes to the point." Then her face broke into an anticipatory smile.

"*What shall you wear?*"

The immemorial question, even at this last minute!

"I haven't anything special," Sonia remembered with dismay.

"Haven't you any white frock at all?"

"Only an old one."

"I'll look it out for you," said the housekeeper. "In the wardrobe here, I suppose?"

"I laid it in a drawer, so that I could keep lavender in it."

"Lavender?" the other woman echoed. "Lavender,

that's very nice, I'm sure." She went to the drawer indicated, and found under layers of tissue paper, just as if it were worth guarding, the white dress, thin and cheap and filmy, with a much washed silk slip. It was obviously home-made. Lavender reposed in all its folds. "A very nice old-fashioned idea," said Mrs. Roberts, bemused.

For she thought of all those other young ladies, who had their perfumes blended for their temperaments.

"It is nothing to do with being old-fashioned," Sonia answered forthrightly. "But I like my things to smell nice, and I've never been able to buy a bottle of scent in my life. Lavender just grew in the garden, you see."

"All that will be changed," said Mrs. Roberts. "All that will be changed," she repeated proudly. "Sir Hugo will see to that; but I am glad, anyway, that you are going to wear white." She went out softly.

The telephone rang. Sonia jumped out of bed, tousled, in her blue pyjamas, and ran to the sitting-room. Hugo Dereham's voice came over the wire.

"That you, Sonia?" It didn't seem so strange by now that he should be calling her Sonia. "We shan't do any work this morning. I'd meant to give you an hour's dictation, but old Robby was quite tearful and said, not only would it bring you bad luck, but that it was not *comme il faut*." She heard his sardonic chuckle. "I don't care if we are *comme il faut*," he said, "Do you, Sonia? But of course I would not bring you bad luck." She thought the old mockery was in his voice again then, and she shivered a little as she stood here in this sun-warmed room, on the June morning of her wedding-day. "Anyway," he was continuing, "I worked you like a dog yesterday, and the night before, didn't I?"

"Not too hard," she said in a small clear voice, "and I can make up for this morning, afterwards." There

was a silence that seemed very sudden at the other end. Then she thought she caught his voice muttering "Make up afterwards?" But it was as if he were speaking to himself and not to her. She held the receiver attentively through the little silence.

"My lawyer's coming along in about an hour," she heard him say, then, "to make those arrangements I told you would be made; and by the way, he will open a bank account for you. You'll be able to draw upon it to-day if you like.."

"I only want it for one thing," she stammered huskily, and heard him reply,

"Oh, but you'll want it for a hundred things, my good child. Don't fool me; you and your one thing!" She hung up the receiver, sorry that her action might seem abrupt; but that mockery in his voice not only always distressed, but a little frightened her.

She imagined the two men downstairs soon, Dereham and some dry solicitor who knew all the family business like a book. It was rather horrible to her that they should be doing this; that it should be the preliminary—that it should be such an immediate and hurried preliminary—to the marriage ceremony; that it should follow so quickly on yesterday, when he had asked her to be his wife. It seemed too much like sale and payment.

She understood, though her thoughts didn't take definite form, the delicacy and the gentleness, and the attempt at just that little of the usual beauty, which the housekeeper was trying to bring to this day.

Only that old woman concerned herself! No one else cared!

All the same, one must not weaken; one must not pretend that there ought to be glamour and romance in this business, even for a moment. It was an arrangement of necessity; and had she not promised her old

babies in Lulham, that she was going to rescue them capably from that plight for which they had only themselves to blame?

As if summoned by her thoughts of them, on her breakfast table, when the housemaid had laid it, and when she herself had bathed, and put a dressing gown over her pyjamas—it was the laziest morning!—was a letter from her father.

It was unusual for him to write letters at all, and she would never have expected him to write to her. She expected all his news and messages to come through her mother. But when she opened the envelope and spread out the letter beside her toast and honey, she realised at once why he had written to her himself.

He was treating her already as a very clever and capable daughter indeed. This venture of hers must have impressed him, and he must already have begun to form some queer irrational belief in her abilities, like the simple ecstatic beliefs which he had in the Army and the Navy and the Post Office, and all those other, to him, immutable institutions. She said to herself helplessly, as she read: "I believe he thinks I am the Bank of England, funny darling. And that is *my* fault, with all my boasting!"

"DEAR SONIA,—You have only been away from us for a few days. Mother has already written to you, I know, and she doesn't know that I am writing this, but I have had a most distressing communication, my child, and perhaps you were right in what you said to us before you left.

"The mortgage people are what I think is called 'closing down' the mortgage, and our little home has to go unless I can find £500 in a week. Isn't it incredible, dear child? Of course, we have been behind with our payments; in fact, I don't think we have paid anything

for more than a year. I seem to remember several very unpleasant letters coming which I burned without answering, for an unpleasant letter, to me, has the same bad influence as an unpleasant person in the house, and, of course, I didn't show them to your mother, for I like to keep the distressing side of life away from her.

"Now, Sonia dear, I want you to write to me at once and tell me if you see the faintest possibility of your being able somehow to borrow or otherwise get such an incredible sum in the next few days. I cannot think in the least how you will do it; at the same time if you could not possibly raise such a sum, dear, perhaps you could send me £30, and I might get them to reconsider the question of these back payments. Only, £500 would clear us altogether.

"I fear this letter would be considered rather vague by more business-like people, but I own to being very vague on these subjects. They don't interest me, and as you know I have no time for business. My own work claims me. All my love,

YOUR FATHER."

"His own work!" she thought. That work which had never brought a penny into Lulham Cottage, that work which he would never commercialise or put upon any profitable basis! And she said to herself, with a profound amazement at the way the miracles were working, "Well, to-day I can wire to them, and though it couldn't possibly be £500, it might be £30." She thought of that bank account which the solicitor was opening for her that morning.

It was a very short morning; never had she known hours to fly so swiftly. Lunch was impossible for her; she could not eat any, although she guessed that Mrs. Roberts had prompted the unusually exquisite meal sent up to her.

Not even to please Mrs. Roberts, with her kind distressed eyes, her fat distressed voice, and her coaxing smile!

In the white frock, the many times washed white gloves, the carefully cleaned white suede slippers that had been her summer best for two years, and another of those linen hats which she and her mother had pieced together and stitched—though this time it was white too—as she sat waiting with a feeling of faintness oppressing her, with nerves playing swift and menacing tricks, the third housemaid came up again with a small florist's box. She was very excited, but trying to be calm, and delighted to have snatched this lovesome errand from Mrs. Roberts.

"Flowers, Miss!"

It was a shoulder knot of pale orchids from Dereham. His little note that accompanied them was laconically brief. "Hope you will wear these.—H.D."

"Thank you," she managed to smile.

"Can I help you put them on, Miss?" the housemaid quivered. The florist had arranged the pins, and the maid fastened the flowers to Sonia's shoulder with gasps of admiration. "Don't they look lovely?"

For a vague reason that she did not define, Sonia could not find them lovely; for the same incomprehensible reason she hated them. They were not what she wanted to wear. They seemed more like Ramonde Allett. But she agreed with the eager other girl.

Then the housemaid informed her,

"And Mr. Follet is waiting downstairs for you, Miss."

"Mr. Follet?"

"He is the lawyer, Miss." How quiveringly and delightedly the young housemaid spoke! Just as in Lulham they all loved a wedding. "Except me," the bride thought.

Sonia went very softly out of her dear little flat with

her head high, and bright colour flying a challenge to life on either cheek. The reasons for what she was about to do mixed strangely into confusion and chaos in her mind; to help Hugo Dereham; to help her parents . . . There was her father's letter thrust into her small handbag.

The primary reason, which she must try to keep clearly before her, was Dereham, because that letter had followed their arrangements, and was incidental. It was incidental that there was no need now to try to imagine in what way she could have helped them, if Dereham had not made that terrifying and strange proposal to her only yesterday afternoon. Events and results were fitting in like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. She saw that. "Life is a jig-saw puzzle!"

As she went down alone and still nervous about its working, in the gilded lift, passing floor after floor as if in survey, she thought timorously, "I suppose this house will be called mine in an hour or two. It won't be mine, really, of course, only people will say, 'How nice your house is, Lady Dereham.' 'How restful your house is, Lady Dereham,' But it won't be mine," she thought, "and I will never consider it as such. I shall never feel that I have any rights here at all."

When she emerged from the lift, in the wide hall stood a man whom she had never seen, holding a silk hat in his hand, correctly black-coated and striped-trousered. He had a clever face, and must be, she thought, about fifty.

He was watching for the lift to descend; and now noted her every gesture and *nuance*, taking in impressions, deferential and charming as his bearing was.

"Miss May?"

"You're Mr. Follet?" she answered, very quietly.

"Yes. I'm to have the great honour of driving with you to the Registrar's. It is a great pleasure and honour."

Barton was at the front door, holding it open. There was a special smile in his eyes for her, and she smiled back with her lips. He was her friend, this servant. The lawyer, following her out, observed that, thinking, "Well, servants are pretty good judges, and she isn't what I expected. She isn't what any one would expect." The Rolls was waiting, the chauffeur was holding open the door, curiously regarding her, though respectfully hiding the curiosity.

For the first time in her life she entered a luxury car. As they drove, the lawyer noted, in his precise mind, all the outward appurtenances of this unusual bride; the little white frock, the little white shoes; the carefully washed white silk stockings, when fashionable women wore sunburn or flesh-tinted chiffon hose, and had worn them for years; the much rubbed white washing gloves, the linen hat; and, good heavens, her little handbag also was home-made! It was of that queer raffia stuff that he recognised, because he had seen earnest women making them for bazaars.

And then, those orchids!

Had Dereham sent her that incongruous shoulder knot, or had she, lacking taste and already savouring her new prospects, chosen them herself?"

"I've been engaged in looking after your interests this morning, I am happy to say," he remarked suavely, but did not add what he had not voiced to Dereham either, that the provision made for this bride seemed to him monstrously inadequate, inhumanly so. He held no brief for secretaries edging themselves into covetable positions; but this girl was quite outside his experience of feminine parties to such contracts, and even had she not been as she was, the arrangements were curiously, almost shamefully, meagre.

While he thought this, and talked a little to this beautiful shy girl, they had reached the registry office.

He looked at her keenly as he helped her out. She was white as paper. "Poor little thing," he thought, puzzled. "Stage fright?" he whispered gaily, but she would have none of it. "No!" she denied, from white lips. She was not going to be frightened.

She entered with the lawyer's hand under her elbow, guiding and even a little supporting her, and Dereham himself met them. He just gave one of his casual glances to Follet, from whom, anyway, he had parted so recently, and then he took Sonia's hand. He lifted it to his lips and kissed it in a gesture so perfect that all at once, although she could not have imagined him doing such a thing, she was quietened and reassured.

She saw that he looked at the orchids.

"Thank you for the flowers, Sir Hugo," she said, giving him his title without thinking.

"Sir Hugo!" the lawyer thought.

Dereham said:

"Oh, not a bit of it, Sonia. I supposed that, like all women, there was nothing you liked better than orchids, the luxury flower." Then with a queer quick rise of resentment she knew definitely why she had hated the orchids. It was because of the spirit in which they had been sent. Orchids in themselves were a mockery on that home-made white dress.

How quickly it was over, how uninspiringly! How drab that ceremony seemed! She did not realise that actually Dereham had done a little to bring a certain pleasant ceremony into this bare place for her sake, that he had ordered the roses to be put there, and that the red carpet on which she trod had been laid down at his command. She knew nothing of such places as this, and the roses and the carpet did not in the least atone to her for the spiritual lack of a holy place, and organ music, and choir boys' sweet high singing, and all the love and the flutterings and good wishes and

excitement, and the wedding bells, that in her very limited experience, had been inevitable to weddings.

But the ring was on her finger, those necessary bare words had been uttered.

Mr. Follet was saying a few more: "My congratulations, Sir Hugo. All my felicitations to you, Lady Dereham."

They were driving away without him, without any wedding favours, without any of the sweetness and the hope and the laughter that other people had.

"All right, Sonia?" Dereham asked, putting his hand over hers for a moment, and feeling how cold it was.

"Quite all right, Sir Hu——"

He interrupted swiftly.

"Sonia, I am Hugo."

She meant to laugh, but caught her breath, and just made a strangled reply:

"I'm quite all right, Hugo."

"You're ice," he said, still feeling her hand.

"That is excitement," she assured him, looking out of the window away from him.

"Are you excited?" he asked.

"Shouldn't I be, Hugo?"

He had not heard that voice from her before. What did she mean? There was even a new touch of irony akin to his own in it. Ah, but she mustn't be ironic! She must remain just what she was. That thought flashed imperatively through his mind.

"I'm quite excited too," he told her.

For a moment, had she known it, he was wistful and humble. She did not know.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Home," he said.

"Home?"

"You have a home in Hilton Square, Sonia."

"Yes," she breathed, "isn't it strange?"

"To-morrow," he said, "or if not to-morrow, some day soon, I thought we could get away, and take a couple of days at Fennimore. Honeymoon. Did you expect a honeymoon, little thing?"

She shook her head. She didn't cry, "You have let me expect so little of this great day, that it doesn't matter what we do or where we go." It was in her mind.

But then, all that mattered was to help him, and she must not forget it.

"The doctors wouldn't let me have more than a couple of days out of their reach," he was adding.

"I should love to see Fennimore," she said, conventionally.

Then she asked him what was to her a very difficult question, and, to him, no more than the sort of thing he expected, although, certainly, not so crudely, so naively, and so soon. "What time do the banks close, Hugo?"

Without hesitating, he looked at the watch on his wrist.

"In half an hour."

"On the way home," she said steadily, seeming to herself as if she were re-reading that letter hidden in her bag, "can I stop at—whichever bank you have put my account in?"

He lifted the speaking tube and gave an order to the chauffeur. She went on trying desperately to make her voice quite hard, because this was really a very hard thing to do.

"How—how much did you put in please, Hugo?"

"To start with," he said abruptly, "£500."

"Thank you, it is very good of you."

"How much are you going to draw out to-day?" he asked.

"Five hundred pounds."

The car drew up outside the bank, and the chauffeur got down and opened the door. He had to stand waiting.

"I stopped the car since you asked me, Sonia," Dereham's cold voice murmured in her ear, "but isn't it rather an inconvenient way of managing, to draw money out in cash, when you have your cheque book waiting for you on your writing-table at home?"

The crimson flood of a blush overwhelmed her. She had never in her life had an account or written a cheque, and so had never considered the ways of these amenities. She could not remember her parents writing a cheque either. Their minute dividends came in and were handed dreamily to some tradesman in an attempt to settle his bill. Sometimes they asked him for change, or their pockets would have gone quite empty. Anyway that was how she had seen money matters go since she was old enough to observe such things, after she had left school.

It was unkind of Dereham to have let her ask for the bank, and to stop the car. She might have gone in, saying "I am Lady Dereham. An account was opened for me this morning. I want to draw it all out, how do I do it, please?" And she knew in this moment that she would then have felt a humiliated fool.

This was the same sort of unkindness which had prompted the gift of orchids for her humble frock. She caught at her dignity, tried to manage the blush, and answered with composure:

"Thank you; how stupid of me not to think of that!"

"All right." He turned to the chauffeur. "Her Ladyship isn't getting out. Home."

They drove on again and came to Hilton Square. Barton was holding the door open by the time the car

stopped, and the housekeeper stood unobtrusively at the back of the hall. She had not summoned the other servants together, and grouped them as she would have liked to do, for she knew her master too well, and that he would hate any such demonstration, but she had her part to play, and wished to play it. She came forward saying :

" Her Ladyship didn't see her rooms before she left. I had better show them to you, my lady."

Dercham said suddenly,

" Oh, no, that will be my pleasure, Robby. You buzz off and sleep away this excitement."

Mrs. Roberts accorded this a little fat laugh, which expressed : " I know you, I know you." But Sonia looked on this new husband in wonder. " You buzz off." Had he really said that, so affectionately, just like an impudent boy, to the fat housekeeper ? It was a new glimpse she caught of him, with a boyish grin on his face. But in a second he was himself again, the man she had known during these last few days. Or was that himself ? What was his real self ? She wanted him mercifully to cease thus to bewilder her.

He put a hand on her arm and led her away masterfully to the lift. They were enclosed there in that tiny space for the first time together, as they shot up smoothly to the second floor.

" Now," he said imperturbably, " here we are." And he opened the door into one of the most lovely rooms, she thought, that she had ever seen. It was a sitting-room, and a definitely womanly room ; not modern ; neither prim nor old-fashioned. It was just right. The prevailing colour was soft blue. Immense bowls of pink and cream roses had been beautifully disposed.

" It was my mother's sitting-room, or, as she called it then, ' boudoir,' " she heard her husband say curtly.

"It hasn't been altered much, though I made a few rearrangements myself this morning."

She looked up at him.

"*Did you?*"

His steady eyes wavered a little before the frank amazement in hers. What did she think of him—this girl, not only as an employer, but as man and husband Well, that part wouldn't very much matter after all. She needn't worry.

"Are you so surprised?" he smiled.

Because he had already hurt her twice to-day, she answered him with the truth in her quietest voice.

"Yes, it does surprise me."

"To think I might want to please any one?" he finished.

She didn't answer.

"You can make any further alterations you want, of course," he remarked, "if it is worth while for so short a time."

He ignored her sudden shrinking, her shudder, and opened the further door, and she saw herself looking into a narrow lobby, an open door on the other side of which led into just the kind of bedroom that the sitting-room would have led her to expect. Dercham didn't follow her in when she stepped nervously over the threshold and looked about her, touching things here and there, just for their sheer beauty and texture, and when she came back again he was standing by her Queen Anne writing desk of inlaid walnut wood.

"You see," he said, picked up the cheque book, waved it, and put it down again.

She stood still.

"We shall be working this afternoon, shan't we . . . Hugo?"

"Yes," he said swiftly, keeping the incredulity out of his voice; letting her see that he accepted an after-

noon's work as usual, as a natural sequence to the strange wedding.

She took off her hat and flung it in a nearby chair—just a natural impatient, rather weary gesture that, she realised with a little shock, she would not have made two hours ago, when this new husband was only an employer. She mustn't let new conditions make any difference! She bit her lip and said:

" You won't mind if I write a short note up here first . . . Hugo ? "

" Not a bit," he answered in a voice of studied formality.

" I can write the cheque then, too," she said, raising her eyes and looking at him.

" Aren't you spending it on dressmakers ? "

She shook her head. Her voice was scarcely more than a murmur.

" No—all that—how could one ? "

" Very easily."

" I want the money far too badly to waste," she said, " and it happens to be just the exact sum."

" What for ? "

She answered slowly, supposing that he had the right to ask.

" For my father and mother. It is the amount that will pay the whole mortgage on the cottage where we've always lived."

His eyebrows drew down into a heavy line. Parents! Relations! He had actually been fool enough to forget all that! This new young wife no doubt brought with her many encumbrances of the kind. Already they were preying on her, were they?

" Do they know yet ? " he inquired swiftly.

" They know nothing Hugo; but, of, course I shall tell them now."

His eyebrows still drawn down in that heavy straight

line, his eyes intent, he went to the door and looked back at her.

"All that, of course, is just as you like, my dear Sonia," he said, formally. "The money is yours."

She was ruffling her fingers through her fair hair, and he asked more gently :

"Headache ? "

"No ! " she said desperately. "No ! "

When he had closed the door behind him, she threw herself into the period chair at that period desk. Her hands still clutched in the waves of her hair, her fingers wrenched and tangled it. She knew a dreadful storm of emotion which, however, she mustn't let break. What was the matter with her ? What was wrong with all this ? It was a plain situation, rather story bookish, even a little bit dramatic, but the reasons for it were of the utmost simplicity, and the conditions were all laid down and easy to comply with. Yet it took her most of the half hour she was allowing herself before she had controlled that strange storm that shook her. Then she picked up a pen and wrote for the first time on that crested paper, with which Mrs. Roberts or some one had already stocked the writing-table.

"DARLINGS,—Here is a cheque for £500, and you will see that I have signed it Sonia Dereham. Sir Hugo and I were married this morning. You mustn't be disappointed that I didn't have the sort of wedding most other girls have, and I know what you'll think when you read this, and that is, that all your dreams naturally came true, and you'll say to yourselves 'Sonia is wiser than she was. She knows now that what we told her about love is real.' However, my two dears, I haven't time to tell you any more just at this minute.

"I am going to enjoy working with Hugo at his book tremendously, all the more now that I am his wife.

"What matters most is that I can send you this incredible sum of money. It is incredible, isn't it? And mind you don't lose the cheque or pay it to any one else, or give it to charity. Be sure you clear the mortgage with it, and in future don't be so wicked about money, because money matters.

All my love."

As she wrote "All my love" the phrase seemed to her empty. She felt as if they no longer had all her love, and they might feel it too. But—no time for introspection!

She put her letter on the table in the hall, where Barton would see it, and found Dereham, as she had surmised, walking up and down the library. The windows, just as they were every ordinary day, were the same on this extraordinary day, wide open, framing a view of the flowery courtyard, with white-butterflies flitting from blossom to blossom. She took her accustomed place, pen and pencil ready, her eyes down, forcing herself not to watch for his every look and movement. So she did not see that gaze of sheer incredulity which again he turned upon her.

However, he too seated himself in the swivel chair before the immense writing-table, as if there were nothing unusual about this afternoon, and they began to work.

There was just one thing that was not quite usual about the afternoon, and that was Barton's fault, when he brought in tea for two at four-thirty.

What prompted her to look up and say to the servant crisply "I'm going to the office very soon, Barton, and will have my tea there if you'll kindly take it in?" She did not know what put the words on her tongue, only that partly it was just a stubborn insistence, a silent insistence to Hugo that things would not be any different between them.

"Very good, my lady."

Then her husband said:

"Aren't you going to pour out my tea, my dear?"

"If you like."

"I should like it very much, indeed. Her Ladyship will change her mind and take tea here, Barton."

"Very good, Sir Hugo." She knew that Barton was pleased. He would not have approved of her going to that office room; and with her tea tray beside her, typing away as she usually did, without pausing except to lift the teacup at hurried intervals, as if she must get the maximum amount of work done in the minimum amount of time.

Dereham voiced it.

"Barton wouldn't at all have approved of that," he said and laughed; and again there was on his face that half boyish grin which had surprised her when he had told Mrs. Roberts to buzz off.

So they had tea together.

The house was very quiet.

"Nice not to have a crowd, isn't it?" he remarked, watching her. "I have told Barton we didn't want to be bothered with any one to-day. I did make that concession to"—and he paused—"romance."

"Oh, why did you, Hugo?"

"Well," he said, "didn't you think that was the right thing to do?"

"Perhaps," she murmured.

Why one right thing, when all else was so wrong?

"Poor little Sonia," he said. "You ought to have had a wedding cake."

"I should have hated it."

"You're too young to hate the idea of wedding cake."

"But this isn't a real wedding," she said.

"Isn't it?" He looked at her steadily. "The law

counts this as a very real wedding, Sonia, so don't underestimate it."

"The law?" she repeated. "But you don't think of it like that, Hugo."

"Don't I?" He watched her. "How do I think of it then, Sonia?"

"It's just a matter of convenience to you."

He did not answer at all, and they drank a second cup of tea in a silence that was hard to bear, because it was impregnated with so many elusive and new emotions. She pitied him passionately; she longed to help him passionately; she had sacrificed passionately; and she knew that somehow this passion about it all forced entry where only reason and logic need come in. It was difficult to guard oneself from the emotion. She was relieved when Dereham said:

"Well, shall we go on for a little while?" and for another hour they continued.

This afternoon, though, she helped him more intimately, finding his notes for him among the pile on his desk, questioning sequences; suggesting; and he encouraged her. Then she picked up the results of their mutual labours as usual and went to the door. He got up and opened it for her, and as she pased him she said:

"Do you know, that surprised me the first day we worked together? That you should open the door for me? I didn't imagine an employer treated his secretary so politely."

She went on, not waiting for a reply, and shut herself into the little office room. There were still two hours in which to work before she need dress for dinner, and she worked. He did not interrupt her—this strange husband; no one interrupted her, and she could feel just the same as ever, just little Sonia May, earnestly striving to keep this remunerative post, so that she

could help others. It was still what it was, a remunerative post—only more remunerative than ever.

It was only when the dressing gong sounded, at seven-thirty, that she put her papers together in the same orderly fashion as usual, closed her typewriter, and went up to dress.

The third housemaid was in the blue bedroom, laying out that funny little Lulham frock, laying out the worn tinsel shoes, and trying to find silk underclothing; but Lady Dereham had no silk underclothing. It was all just faded pink lawn with innocent little blue or yellow edges, cut from paper patterns, and stitched by herself. The third housemaid was very thoughtful over it, though full of a respectful enthusiasm for the wonders of to-day.

"Mrs. Roberts said I was to ask you to allow me to help you to-night, my lady. Your own maid will be arriving to-morrow."

"My own maid?" Sonia thought furiously. "I am being treated as if I had no will of my own!" And she caught the girl's hand in hers.

"I'd rather have you," she said impulsively.

"Oh, you are sweet," the third housemaid cried, adding hastily, "My lady."

"Well, don't you think," said Sonia, "that as I've dressed myself always, I can do the same to-night?"

"Nothing faddy about her, and never will be," the third housemaid said afterwards in the servants' hall, but aloud she implored: "I can brush your hair, my lady. You might like my hair brushing. I have often brushed other girls' hair just for a treat."

"Very well; give me a treat," Sonia said, and sat down before the dressing table. Her only wedding day indulgence; the only touch of gala that marked the day!

Yet after all it was nice to have one's hair brushed for one, and this girl did it sympathetically and rhyth-

mically. Sonia could have shut her eyes and drifted off to sleep under the soothing process; in fact, her eyelids did close; and she was almost drifting away when the brushing stopped, because there was no time for more.

It was going to be rather a terrifying dinner.

The chef had done marvellously, and Barton had got up champagne. Mrs. Roberts herself had done the table decorations with a nice hand, but between this bride and bridegroom there was a barrier that each felt more strongly with the passing of each moment.

"Poor little girl," Dereham actually thought to himself.

But she was extraordinarily brave and assured. He found himself thinking, without any cynicism in his mind now, that indeed it took courage and assurance to carry this situation as she was carrying it.

He had let himself be so shamefully sceptical about her all the time, and now he knew perfectly well, with an irritated feeling of guilt, that he had been wrong over his orchids and that affair of the bank. He had been unkind. She wouldn't understand these particular acts of unkindness. They would have bewildered her, for now, in the light of one of his happier moods, he saw that she had the gift of true simplicity. She had a kind of pure singleness of heart and mind, not understanding what he, with his man's full experience, knew only too well to be the reason that had prompted him over these small offences. It had been a sudden surge of natural rage that here was this lovely girl, so strangely and incongruously his wife, whom many men might readily envy him, so accessible and yet completely inaccessible, by the very nature of their bargain not to be touched.

He had hurt her because in his own unhappiness he had wanted to find her unworthy of love, and could not.

If she had been unworthy of love, it would have helped him.

He would not be thinking suddenly just as other men would think on their wedding day.

And the time came when, as on that other night, Barton left them with the glow of candle light in wine, and on blooming grapes and peaches; and the evening silently reached some sort of climax of significance.

"You're not unhappy, are you?" he asked, peeling her peach for her, while she watched him, quiescent, and liking him to do this small service for her.

"Not at all unhappy," she said. "I am tremendously happy—just for a minute," she added.

"And what makes the happiness, Sonia?"

"Oh," she said, and she looked about the room, "let me see . . . Those old picture frames in this lovely soft light. I cannot criticise the pictures, but I love the frames. I'm as simple and as ignorant as that, you see, Hugo. And the candle light makes me happy, and the colour of the fruit, and this table polished till it's like a great black mirror, and the trees in the square, and my blue rooms; in fact, everything makes me happy for a moment."

"And what will make the unhappiness?" he said steadily.

"I would rather that this moment lasted, and I know it can't," she temporised.

She was wondering about other moments of course, poor little girl, wondering about the future, their immediate future, wondering what marriage meant even if it was only a matter of convenience. She was puzzled and tired, though not, Hugo guessed, afraid.

"But I must give you a lot of happy times, if they're so simple, he said meditatively. "If only to justify and flatter myself, I must do it, for man is a very vain animal, you know, Sonia. He likes people to envy his

wife. He likes to feel grand over his dealings with her. That is why a clever woman can do so much with a man. I want you, for instance, to have all the clothes you would like, not only for your sake, but more for mine. You must wear my mother's pearls, and I shall have her diamonds reset for you, but not so much for your sake as for mine, because, just as a man likes to be proud of his house and his cars, and his horses and his friends and the name he makes or has, so he likes to be proud of his wife. You observe how selfish men are."

All the time he was talking she didn't believe him; these ironies in his now gentle voice seemed to convey other things to her. She had just an inkling of that thing which half an hour before he had been thinking to himself. She didn't understand. That was true. But it thrilled her. Her heart and her pulses leapt to it. Then as she went on listening almost in a dream, he awaked her out of that dream with his next words.

"I don't think I've put it quite plainly enough to you, Sonia. You're not feeling sufficiently reassured, and I want to tell you," he said, hardening his voice and his heart, "that you needn't have any fear that I shall encroach in any way upon your complete privacy. There will be no intrusions. I expect nothing from you as a wife. In the eyes of the world and the law we're married, but in our own eyes, Sonia, we shall be exactly as we were before." The light hardness of his voice robbed the next words of their tragedy. "You will be a widow before you're ever really a wife."

Surely she had been hoping for this promise from him, this reassurance, this explaining and ratification of their cold bargain? Surely, surely, she had wanted him to tell her exactly in clear words what he had just said? She recalled, in a passionate rush of memory, how that morning, when she had put on the white frock for her

wedding, she had asked herself, "Just why am I agreeing to marry this man ?"

And she recalled how she had answered herself, "It's because I pity him. It's because he is ill, and in no other way can I help him, in just the way it is necessary for him to be helped.

And then it is for mother and father too." Now in a great revelation she knew silently the real reason why she had married him. Because she loved him.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE did not feel in the least like Lady Dereham. She felt still just like little Sonia May, until she went into the library next morning with pencil and pad, in one of her little linen frocks just as usual, to take dictation from her husband.

Dereham, after kissing her hand in the way he had done yesterday, showed her quietly the notice in that morning's *Times*, among the marriages.

"On June 6th, at the Baker Street Registrar's Office, Sonia May, only child of Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert May of Lulham, Devon, to Sir Hugo Dereham, 5th Baronet of Fennimore, Wales, and 14 Hilton Square, W."

"I think," he consulted her, "that is sufficient announcement for our friends."

"You know best," she answered.

"What a wife !" he said with a little laugh. For a moment or two after she had sat down in her usual place, and he had taken the swivel chair at his writing-table, he seemed as if he could not begin to work.

"This is rather a curious situation, isn't it ?' he said. "Do you find it worrying ?"

"No," she lied, "and I see nothing curious in a wife"—she continued to look him straight in the eyes—"helping her husband."

"It sounds idyllic," he answered, and then they plunged into such a welter of work as he had never given her before. His facts, his groupings, and his theories came from him more and more easily, as if his brain was working with new power. Without a pause and for two hours she did not so much as look up; then the telephone rang. He snatched up the receiver impatiently and said:

"Oh . . . good-morning, Ramonde. Yes? Of course it is so. Congratulate me, won't you? I didn't credit you with reading the more serious newspapers; though why not? Of course, you look for all the doings of your friends; but hold on Ramonde, my wife would like to speak to you."

Sonia leaned back, her pencil dropped, clutching the arms of her chair.

"No, Hugo," she whispered.

"Yes," he said. He got up, and put his hands on either side of her waist and lifted her from the chair. "Go on, child, and face it."

His eyes were on her straight slim back and mop of fair hair as she stood holding the receiver. She had a very proud carriage and it occurred to him that he had not noticed before how proud it was. The very white nape of her neck was slender, like the stalk of a pale rose. In a moment she was talking in a steady voice:

"Oh, thank you, Miss Allett, your good wishes are very kind. Yes, it was a very quiet affair . . . I suppose, Miss Allett, that my husband thought this was our business entirely." Behind her Dereham gave his very soft sardonic laugh. "It's so good of you to say you'll call for me in your car, but," and much as she wished to resist it, she could not, "I have mine!" Again that

soft sardonic laugh behind her, and she flinched . . . "Oh, of course I shall be delighted to go to your dressmaker if I think of buying any clothes. Thank you, very, very much. I am busy taking dictation, so you will understand I cannot talk to you any more. Good-bye."

"That did quite well," said Dereham as she hung up, "and, if I were you, child, I would let Ramonde take you to her dressmaker. She sees a commission out of it, and God knows she must want money badly enough from the way she spends what she hasn't got, and never will have."

"I don't care about having any clothes, Hugo."

"But I explained to you last night at dinner," he said briefly, "all the reasons why you should buy them."

"I didn't take you seriously. I could not. I thought you were just being hateful about yourself."

"And to you?"

"A little bit," she said. She picked up and dropped her pencil and the pad with hands that quivered a little. "Besides," she said, "you gave me five hundred pounds yesterday, and I spent it all on something else. One can't have everything at once."

He swivelled the chair round away from her and sat very still at the writing-table with his head on his hands.

"There's another five hundred pounds to your account this morning."

"That makes a thousand," she gasped. The arithmetic appalled her. "Besides," she said, rather wildly, again defending herself from the responsibility of this awful expenditure, "I shan't have any time to wear the clothes, Hugo; I work all day."

"So you do," he said, a little muffled, still not looking at her. "You work all day. We might readjust that."

" Let us begin again, Hugo."

" In a moment," he said, and picked up the telephone receiver, and dialled a number.

" That you again, Ramonde ? Hugo speaking. What about calling and taking my wife out shopping at four this afternoon ? "

" But my dear Hugo, I am charmed," Ramonde's breathless, furious, nearly unmanageable voice came back.

" You don't sound quite yourself," he said coolly. " I hope you'll feel better by then. Good-bye." As he hung up, he heard his young wife rebuking him.

" You should not have said that ; you should not talk to her like that ; after all, she is a woman too."

" My dear child," he answered, " Ramonde Allett has stood up to far worse than that when it's suited her, I can assure you. However, as you suggest, let us begin again."

When at last they finished, she asked :

" I suppose we shall be lunching together, Hugo ? "

" My dear ! " he muttered as if in a comic despair.

" You mean we shall ? "

He turned the chair round to face her."

" Sonia, my dear, I shall be really hurt, although I dare say it is difficult for you to imagine that my hide isn't too tough for such squeamishness, if you don't treat this house and everything in it as your own—the ox, the ass, and the man-servant and the maid-servant, Sonia——"

" All except you," she said, in a final voice that was so unexpected, that for a moment Hugo only stared, and then he reached out and patted her knee.

" I'm included, Sonia. I'm perhaps the ass. I will trust to your kind treatment of me." But then just in her usual manner she got up and went to the door, and in his usual manner he rose and opened it for her

He watched her going across the hall to the office, where she shut herself in without a backward look.

She was very disturbing—this young wife. She would not waver, nor question, nor tempt, nor cajole.

He looked forward inexplicably to luncheon.

It was at luncheon that Barton heard what he afterward told Mrs. Roberts was the strangest conversation, in his experience, between bride and bridegroom. "It was concerned entirely with Sir Hugo's work, and her Ladyship was as eager as himself, in fact eagerer, Mrs. Roberts; eagerer." But though to Barton and to Mrs. Roberts this was lamentable, and although to Dereham it grew more and more surprising, because it was nearly impossible for him to believe that there could be a woman who was not scheming, not playing a part, to Sonia that was an hour of unmixed happiness, for he let her talk with him as if she had rights in the book, as if on her shoulders lay quite half the responsibility of getting the work through.

She loved that.

The Lulham telegram came as they lingered over coffee in the paved garden.

"Overjoyed all happiness darling to you and your dear husband not a bit surprised hope to see you both very soon love Mother and Father."

She handed this to her husband. He thought, but didn't say: "They have got the £500 cheque by now, and they don't even mention it; queer people." It was Sonia who exclaimed:

"They don't mention the five hundred!"

"Why worry, child? They have got it."

"How shall I know they have spent it in the right way, as I have told them to, unless they tell me?"

"Why?" He asked cautiously. "What might they do with it?"

She assured him earnestly with a perplexed frown :

" They would break into it for anybody in need, who happened to turn up at the crucial moment."

" What do you want to do ? " he asked.

" I would like to take a little time off to talk to them, Hugo."

A little time off . . . He murmured dryly :

" Where ? Here ? "

" Oh, not necessarily," she said quickly.

She was too much for him, with her disclaimers.

" But this is the right house for your parents to come to, Sonia," he said. " I shall write, or, better still, telegraph to them to-day, and ask them to spend to-morrow with us. In fact, I suppose I shall ask them to spend a day or two."

In the midst of her astonishment she could yet say, with conviction and relief :

" They won't want to, Hugo. They will come up on the early train and go back the same day. To-morrow—why to-morrow just happens to be cheap excursion day from Lulham. That's fortunate ! But they won't *stay*."

He had a sensation as if his jaw had dropped, although actually he kept his countenance.

" We'll see." He signed to Barton, who was apt to keep within call a good deal, and who had found some little job, such as emptying an ash-tray, straightening a cushion, in the library. " Just bring me a telegraph form." He handed the filled-in form to Sonia.

" Delighted your kind telegram to my wife most pleased to see you any time to stay a few days if convenient to you what about to-morrow Hugo Dereham."

" But Hugo, we literally haven't time, even for mother and father ! " And the wistfulness of it all smote her again poignantly, as they sat here together,

out in this lovely little formal garden, with the white butterflies flitting, and the massed tree tops of the square giving the adventurous impression of a forest just on the other side of all the tall houses, while all the time there was no adventure, no pleasure in any of it.

"We must make a little time for decency's sake, Sonia," he said. "I expect I had forgotten that"—he paused—"to a minimum extent, one must conform with proper usages."

She said nervously:

"I think that is very sweet and kind of you, and now I will get back to work. But Hugo, you'll rest. You've got to rest this afternoon."

His surprise at her timid authority was more of a pleasure than an irritation, although he hated to be the object of any coercion, just as he always had hated it, right from babyhood.

"Are you *telling* me I must rest, Sonia?" She met a lurking smile in his inscrutable light eyes.

"I *am* telling you, Hugo. At least, there is one more thing a wife . . ." she stumbled over the word, "can be to you—one more thing than a mere secretary can be, I mean."

"And what is that?" he asked softly.

"Oh; a nurse." The answer smote him unconscionably hard, because she meant it implicitly, and she meant no more. He could not doubt it.

"Where am I going to rest?" he asked, pretending meekness.

"Your own room, if there is no telephone there."

"There is," he said, "but it is a portable telephone, like the one I had put upstairs for you."

"Then I shall come and see it is taken out of your reach." Again they were in the lift together, with reminiscences of that first time yesterday; but now they were not going up to her blue rooms, but into the

room opposite. She went in quietly, and without any hesitation or embarrassment, and he did not guess what the utterly unprecedented effort cost her. Here was no carefully planned suite, but one large room, an austere man's room with a narrow, hard, flat bed, writing-table, straight chairs, old Jacobean wardrobe and bureau. The floor had a harsh brown carpet. Its one attraction to her was that its window, like her windows, framed the massed foliage that waved outside. She looked round, still daring, saw the telephone, pulled the plug out of the wall, and bore it away with her.

At the door she turned :

" Now, Hugo ! "

He was standing watching her with the strangest expression on his face.

" All right," he said. " All right." There came that rare engaging grin. " Buzz off."

She felt herself stop trembling because that made her able to laugh, and she had no idea that he knew all about it. She waved *Au Revoir* gaily from the door, and went downstairs. She felt gay. It was extraordinarily how light and happy her heart felt with all its knowledge of how it loved him ; though it must lose him.

Ramonde Allett, let in by Barton, literally pounced in at four o'clock, went with her usual air of rights-in-this-house impatiently across the hall, and found the new Lady Dereham at her typewriter.

" My good girl ! "

Sonia looked up. There was Ramonde in the same pale grey frock, that looked a little wearier every time of wearing, and the impudent little yellow hat pulled down over one eye, and her face a glitter of malice and excitement, which she tried, not too successfully, to conceal.

" Oh, Miss Allett," Sonia said, rising, preoccupied.

"Let Barton give you some tea, while I straighten up here."

"Don't want any tea," Ramonde returned. "We can have that at Partner's. I've come to take you out. I see that the car hasn't come round yet. I'm leaving my old trap parked here, as I rather understood this morning that you would want to use yours." How indelicately her voice implied: "Of course you would want to use all your toys and novelties, you little upstart!"

Sonia thought, her hands busy stacking her papers: "I shall go with her, and I shall ask her to help me, because of Hugo."

Without being authorised, Ramonde put a finger on the bell and kept it there till Barton appeared hurriedly.

"Her Ladyship," she drawled, "wants the car at once, Barton." The servant looked past her to Sonia.

"Very good, my lady."

"Do you want to fetch a hat, my dear?" said Ramonde running her eyes deliberately up and down Lady Dereham's linen frock, in deliberated assessment.

"I suppose one wears a hat."

"I don't really see that it will improve things, my dear. Why should you worry?" Her intonation explained: "With or without a hat you must see you are quite inadequately dressed." But she met this new bride's straight and haughty eyes—she would never have guessed the girl could look like that—and she tried to grace her remarks by adding: "Such a lot of women with hair as beautiful as yours are going about hatless everywhere nowadays."

"If she thinks I am going to take her word for it just like any *ingenue*," Sonia thought spiritedly, "she's mistaken"; and she herself rang the bell.

"Barton, ask——" she was about to ask for the third housemaid, but remembered that her own maid had

arrived, and that her name was Mathilde. "Tell Mathilde to bring me a hat and some gloves." That was surely better! She led the way out across the hall into the drawing-room, where the Frenchwoman appeared almost instantly with the right, if sorry, hat, to match her mistress's frock, with the best gloves she had been able to find, with the raffia handbag, into which she had put a clean handkerchief, marvelling the while at the poverty of her ladyship's equipment.

"The car is here, my lady," Barton said.

They sat side by side, driving through the summer streets; such pleasant streets for the rich, offering treasure and pleasure and beauty.

Partner's was the first famous dress establishment that Sonia had ever either visited or imagined. She had had no idea that its exterior would be like the exterior of any wealthy private house, and that a uniformed man-servant would open the massive front door at which they must ring. Up wide stairs, treading on deep-piled carpets into the great salon, where Partner himself met them, they went, and now Ramonde's voice was smooth, caressing.

"I persuaded Lady Dereham to come to see you. She wants some clothes immediately."

The new Lady Dereham was aware that Partner had a shock of surprise as his experienced eyes rested upon her. He was the type of man she didn't know at all, slick and slim, with rather a full lower jaw, eyes like sloes, and a full-lipped twitching mouth, and he knew more than any woman would ever know about women's clothes. He knew their meanings, their effects, their causes and results. To talk to him on this subject was like entering a statesmanlike discussion of the subtlest, most secret, and most strategic kind. She was plunged into a sea of extravagance, of which every iota seemed justified, because of its sheer beauty. Yet all the same

she resisted the voice of the tempter, from Ramonde, and repeated her own ideas determinedly:

"Just a little plain suit, with just a little plain hat, and a little plain blouse; just two simple day frocks; just two evening gowns." Which seemed to her lavish beyond dreams, but at which Partner smiled.

"Lady Dereham is making a very modest choice."

"This is nothing of a trousseau, darling," Ramonde kept urging her in a low voice, that was well tuned for Partner to hear, because acquisition of more than one garment for herself depended entirely upon this girl's expenditure to-day. "You'll soon want frocks for the *plage*, my sweet," she was saying, with Partner listening. "We must make Hugo take you abroad. I believe it would do you a lot of good; a lot of good," she repeated emphatically, "and then why not give your orders for the moors now?"

"The moors . . ."

"I don't think my husband will shoot this year," said Sonia slowly.

"Oh, but, my dear, you must make him. After all, there's the question of your own friends to consider," said Ramonde in the most sincere voice, underneath which, as Sonia felt, lay the unuttered "and, by the way, I wonder who your friends are?" She continued vividly: "You must make him come out of his shell. It can't do him any harm; he can take all the care in the world, but surely his health need not prevent other people enjoying themselves. And there are the autumn meetings. Do you race?"

Partner, listening blandly, was experienced enough to know the malice of all this, but Sonia was not concerned much with any malice towards herself. She was thinking only, "And this woman wanted to marry Hugo!"

"You'll have to let me find you some one to present you next season," said Ramonde, "unless Hugo pro-

duce an old relative. I suppose he will, but that is a long way ahead." She had not the slightest idea of how deep her words cut into the heart of this little novice.

Next season Hugo Dereham would not be here. She would be a widow as he had told her last night, before she had ever been wife. And she had begun to have the definite thoughts now of wifehood. Happy wifehood—although such a condition was impossible for her—didn't consist entirely in a dedication of practical services such as she was devotedly offering to her husband. There was more in it—more. There was in it that strange fine rapture which she had seen, without then knowing it for what it was, between her own mother and father.

"What does Lady Dereham think?" Partner was begging, but Lady Dereham thought no further about his beautiful offerings than she had thought already. "One little day suit, two little plain frocks, two evening gowns."

Ramonde said, knowing quite well that Partner was lifting a mental eyebrow at her:

"Well, you'd better have a real revel in *lingerie*, then, darling. There are simply the dreamiest things here," although she had meant to take her victim to another house for that.

But Partner would not be satisfied with what he had already received, to the extent of providing Ramonde with even one good tweed frock for the autumn house parties. "The *lingerie* may touch her," she thought vexedly, "the little miser! Country girls of the middle class," she went on thinking, "are notoriously thrifty, notoriously knowing."

She had expected Sonia to acquire wisdom, only not so soon.

Partner took them himself to another of his salons where an exquisite woman presided. This woman again

offered incredible loveliness, but again Ramonde had to listen to young Lady Dereham saying, "Three of the *crepe-de-chine* nightgowns, and three of the satin pyjama suits, and three of those sets and three of these are all I want."

"There isn't even so much as a chemise in it for me," Ramonde thought with mounting indignation.

"My sweet," she said again to Sonia, "why not save time, and really buy a supply that will last you a little while?"

"These will last long enough," Sonia smiled; and she thought, "If only Ramonde would not keep on saying these things! I can't bear it. I must go home and cry."

Ramonde Allett, of course, did not know what she knew.

Ramonde continued persistent and indefatigable.

Well then, if there was no more to be chosen at Partners, there remained the question of shoes and stockings. There was simply only one place in London to buy these, that was the shop which Ramonde patronised herself. They went there, but made purchases only on the same modest scale. All the bride had to say again was very quietly and formally:

"These are all I want, Miss Allett." "Ramonde, Sonia dear, Ramonde." "If I may call you Ramonde, thank you. I assure you that I shan't have use for any more shoes and stockings than I have bought here."

"What does she mean?" Ramonde asked herself, and aloud she said scoffingly:

"Are you really going to bury yourself for life?"

Was it by design, or by accident that she used words which scarified and hurt.

"For life," and "bury" . . .

"Ramonde," said Sonia stonily, looking at her with a white face, "I'm going home."

"Oh, my dear, you're pale, and we didn't make Partner give us tea."

"Would her ladyship like a cup of tea?" an obeisant manager enquired.

But her ladyship would not.

"I'm dying for one," Ramonde remarked, as they got into the car again.

"You must let me give you some when we get home."

"Cocktail time then," said Ramonde, "and I shall simply die if I don't have a couple of Barton's best."

But she didn't go in again to the Hilton Square house that afternoon after all, because her common sense told her that she had better leave this thing alone for a little while, and she had been not a little shaky herself to-day after the blow of that announcement in *The Times* this morning. So when she got out of Sonia's car, she went straight to her own little shabby *coupe*, parked before the house, and, "Sonia," she protested, "you didn't really think I'd intrude on your honeymoon, dear—such as it is—did you?" She drove off. Her driving was always rather meteoric, rushing her swiftly forward to nowhere so very particular, her eyes staring forward, looking for nothing in particular, her whole body poised as if for impatient flight—to nowhere at all.

Sonia could come down to dinner in one of the new gowns that night, for Partner, with a faint shrug, and seeing that she meant at present to give no orders which would cause her any trouble, had actually let her have his models, which fitted her like a skin. She was not sorry, but glad, to find that a very disconcerted Francis Selwinn was dining with them, and so making a third. As she came into the long drawing-room Selwinn, who had telephoned his congratulations to his cousin only about two hours earlier, and had been asked to come

in to dinner, regarded her both with pity and chagrin. She looked very beautiful, this young girl, and—quite as if born to the extravagance of the long oyster coloured frock, that fell to the tips of her toes. She wore three strings of pearls, because Dereham had sent them to her, by her maid, when she went up to dress, and in spite of the Frenchwoman's rapture and admiration, she did not yet guess that they were worth quite a fabulous sum; so she wore them easily and unconsciously, just because her husband wished it; she, herself, uncaring.

Their first dinner alone as man and wife—only now the dinner was not to be alone! Thank God! Selwinn was there with his kind, easy manners, his caressing voice, his quickness to note alarms and awkwardnesses, and his charming tact in soothing them. Near him stood her husband. Light broke over her whole face as she saw Francis Selwinn, and her step quickened a very little, involuntarily, because here was some one who loved Hugo too, and, moreover, who understood her own insufficiencies, who was an ally. Her hands were outstretched, and he took them both.

"Is this my cousin now, Hugo?" he said, laughing, although, all the way here, he had been groaning to himself that this was no laughing matter. "May I kiss her?"

"If she allows it," Dereham said. He had looked at this young wife's face when she discovered Selwinn to be with them. He had seen the glow and the relief, and inevitably he thought to himself, "Yes, Francis is just the fellow to take any woman's fancy. I have been cruel . . . Only it will not be for so very long." He had a habit of thinking forward very swiftly and directly, when his mind had leapt to any conclusion, however premature that conclusion might be, and now, he began to think more or less carefully what Sonia's

future might hold, when he was gone, when he could no longer see that sensitive face haloed by the thick fair curls. Would the next man actually be Selwinn? Was his successor already standing here? A rush of utterly unreasonable anger and jealousy invaded his heart, and he was at pains to calm it. That way, the way of angry emotions piled one upon the other, meant, all the sooner, death. His mind cleared, and he heard Francis explaining to Sonia, after the most perfectly managed kiss had been given, that he was quite aware he ought not to be here at all on their first evening together. He apologised, earnestly, giving her hands a little squeeze before he let them go. But he had managed to convey to her—and she was so grateful to him—that he knew perfectly well their first evening together, and all their evenings together, would not be by any means unalloyed bliss; that he guessed his presence to be, in fact, rather a safety valve for both of them; that they were in need of safety valves; and, further, that he alone in all the world charitably understood this inordinately hasty marriage.

"Did you buy much, Sonia?" her husband asked.

"I bought quite enough," she answered.

"What is enough for a woman?" Selwinn began teasing, but he stopped instantly, sensing the drift of her words, just as Dereham did. She meant that, tragically soon, she would wear mourning clothes. Selwinn was not a man given to useless griefs. He was light-hearted and eminently practical. Good old Hugo! It was the most damnable shame, but one had to face up to it. He was actually thinking, with his connoisseur's mind where a woman was concerned, "The child will look perfectly lovely in black."

He had lunched at his club that day, then gone down to Ranelagh, and had met men and women who had stopped him to observe: "Remarkable piece of news,

your cousin's marriage!" They had looked at him, either with a cynical sympathy and understanding, or in some cases a friendly derision. They knew what it would mean. Of course they did! It would mean children. The whole of Francis Selwinn's future prospects—so they had thought—had vanished. That he took it so cheerfully was a matter for their admiration. He had been reflecting, while he talked with them, that of course they didn't know poor old Hugo wouldn't be here much longer. They only saw Francis' future fortunes vanishing in one grand sweep.

He saw a little better than that, but it wasn't much better. He'd still have Fennimore, and the town house would pass to him, but there would be precious little family money to keep them up on. Hugo Dereham's private fortune was what enabled him to live as he did, and that private fortune would now go, naturally, to this young girl who had come so quietly into this house only a few days before, and who was now its mistress.

Even so, one could not entirely discount the chances of a posthumous heir.

It was impossible for Francis Selwinn not to calculate all hazards, however decently he might try to do so, while he sat talking neatly and wittily between his cousin and his wife at the dinner table, that nuptial evening.

Then presently, over the port, after Sonia left them, Dereham began to speak to him on the subject at both their hearts.

"You're surprised, Francis, and you're hurt. I don't mean in your feelings. You're not a sentimental old woman. But in something a damned sight more important—your prospects. Of course, directly you saw your *Times* this morning, you recollected how things would stand."

"Exactly," Selwinn nodded. Bleak-hearted, he could still be debonair.

"I'm lucky," Dereham said, still abruptly, "Don't you think so?"

"Yes," Selwinn answered more deliberately than usual, "you are, and if your wife were any other girl but the one she is, I would say that she is lucky too. As things are, she is to be pitied, Hugo. Pitied."

"Why?" said Dereham, carefully.

"Because she feels very deeply," Selwinn answered with unwonted seriousness. "She hasn't hardened off like the other women one knows."

"Well, before you say any more," said Dereham, not dropping that curt voice, "you had better understand, Francis, that it is entirely an arrangement of necessity. We are married, and she is called Lady Dereham, but I should be more of a brute than I am if I tried to take any advantage of that.

"My God!" Selwinn thought.

Dereham went on:

"It so happens that you found me a peculiarly perfect secretary to finish the only thing in the world that I most want to do before I get out of it. But I'm in a queer case—you know all about that; and my secretary has got to live in the house and work with me day or night under any conditions. I've been made fully aware that you cannot ask a beautiful thing like Sonia . . ." Just for a moment he stopped, his face softening on her name, so that Selwinn thought quickly to himself: "Poor old Hugo loves her."

Dereham went on, "I was saying, you cannot ask a beautiful thing like Sonia to make herself the subject of all kinds of unsavoury gossip. I wouldn't have scandal touch her; it is so easy to see that it never has. And so I asked her to do this for me, and the conditions I made were not perhaps very generous."

He paused again, and thought of the way he had explained to her, how small a pittance he should leave her; and remorse took him again, not just the twinge that he knew before, when he saw how little she cared about it all, but deep whole-hearted remorse and even shame.

He looked searchingly at his cousin, and waited for what he might say.

"Well, old man," Selwinn said at last, "I have heard of these quixotic arrangements."

"Quixotic on whose side?"

"Well, on both sides perhaps, Hugo."

"Go on."

"What am I to say?" said Selwinn. "That anyhow your widow won't be worse off, old man, than before she married you. And anyway she gains . . . well, the protection that money can give, doesn't she?"

Still staring searchingly at Selwinn, Dereham suddenly thought to himseff. "Yes, she shall gain the protection that money can give. It is a great protection. How dared I even think of treating her so? Can't I believe in the real beauty and sincerity of even one woman? She shall have all that I have to give her, at least."

"True, Francis," he said, "true."

His rare friendly smile broke over his face.

"And so you're not hipped at all, not a bit, old man? Good sportsman," he said, and then they got up and went to join a very lonely little lady, who was standing by the heavy scented lilies under the moonlight, in a paved garden, looking, on this most important day of her life, as if she found the world much too big for her.

That night, the first night of their marriage, their wedding night, again Sonia had to hold Dereham's head on her shoulder, and to help him over a second attack

such as she had seen only three nights ago in the library. She was not terribly surprised, because a whisper seemed in her ear as they parted and went their ways: "This isn't good-night." She had been undressing, telling herself she was very happy, trying not to relive too accurately the events of that day, when she thought she heard a faint call. The whisper in her ear had swelled to that—a call. She had sent her maid away, because it seemed too absurd that already one could not even put oneself to bed. She flung a wrap around her, and ran across the intervening corridor to her husband's door. Even through it she could hear his gasping breathing, and a moan shook her. She went in. This was what the inarticulate whisper had been about, warning her, not of delight, but of suffering. Through all the trembling terror, helping him, and interpreting any sign he could make to her, she was thankful that this attack was not so dreadful as the other one. Brandy was at hand—his medicine—and quickly she had poured out the relieving drops, and put her arm under his head, and the glass to his lips, and miraculously that savage pain was stilled. He whispered to her:

"Don't call Barton. This is just nothing. It's been a big day. Stay by me just a little while, that's all."

"The doctor?"

"Not till the morning," he whispered.

She knew him quite well enough to allow him his own directions.

As she stayed beside his bed, his hand held soothingly between both of hers, he wanted to talk a little as he grew easier.

"That was really nothing, Sonia."

"Won't it come back?"

"No, it won't come back, my dear. That medicine is a miracle of alleviation. Glad you heard me, though."

" I'd a feeling," she whispered back, " a feeling somehow that you might need me."

" Poor bride ! " he said, and then—she was leaning near him—his free hand went up cautiously and stroked her hair. " Rather strange——" he began, and stopped. The hand dropped again as if regretting its gesture.

" We shan't be able to work to-morrow, properly," he said, in a practical voice.

" I've still got some left to do, Hugo."

" I'm sorry to slave-drive my own wife."

" Don't talk," she whispered.

He would talk just a little more.

" If I get a good day to-morrow, we could work late, Sonia."

She said :

" We will." She dared, then, to put up one of her hands and to smooth the hair back from his forehead. It was just the natural gesture of a nurse to an invalid, but very carefully he also raised his free hand again and held hers there.

" You're very nice," he said. " You're sweet."

She sat beside him while he slept, until dawn broke, and then because he still slept and his face was peaceful, all pain gone from it, she got up, and crept back to her own room to sleep too. Her complete dedication to his purpose didn't yet seem at all strange to her.

In the morning her mother's telegram lay upon her breakfast tray. It was rather bewilderingly strange and lovely to awake to that flood of sunlight in the blue room, and, sitting up, diaphanously night-clothed by Partner, to find, propped up against the fragile breakfast service, that message from home. " We are coming to see you this morning but not to stay Mother and Father."

Just as she had known they would ! She thought secretly that her husband was wonderful about that

telegram, and it was only her desperate insistence on working that morning as usual, before the Mays arrived, that made him give way and allow her to work at all. She brought her pad and pencil to his bedside, relieved that he consented, on her urgent implorings, to stay there restfully for awhile.

"Are you going to look after me?" he asked, smiling, and she answered seriously.

"That is my job now, as well as the other job, I mean." He was not looking ill, and he assured her again that the attack had been very, very slight, that he felt no after effects, and that this rest was merely her wifely over-protection. She tried to forget that little caress in the silent hours of the night, and did not know that he tried to forget it too, with less result. So she absorbed herself in the work, trying harder than ever to help him to keep his thoughts clear without any effort, to anticipate his thoughts, and even—she felt it with a little deep thrill—to inspire.

But at mid-day he would get up.

"I'm not a crock," he said as usual. "And I would hate your people to find such an unsatisfactory bridegroom. You haven't told them about my wretched state, have you?"

"I have not had time to tell them anything much, Hugo."

"No," he said sympathetically. "It has all been dreadfully quick work for you, poor child, hasn't it? But you must just forgive me, Sonia, for being the kind of fellow who wants what he wants just when he wants it."

His eyes followed her to the door as she went out of that austere apartment.

"That's my wife," he kept remembering, like a refrain.

She was a little fatigued again with that night of

watching, and she could not have had more than three hours sleep at the best, for she had been here bright and early to see how he fared, and then to follow his breakfast tray quickly with her secretarial services. That was what a wife could do!

"Tell Barton," he called, just before the door shut, "that we have very important guests for luncheon."

She loved the way he said that, very kindly, as if he meant it, and also as if he meant to please her. She went down and arranged the great consignment of flowers which had just arrived from the florist. Her drawing-room looked a temple of beauty when she had finished. "My drawing-room," she thought. Yes, it was hers just for a little while. She would think it over and over again! Say it to herself again and again: "Mine!" She began to enjoy that sense of possessions, temporary though they were, and though, behind them, the background was sad.

Dereham had joined her by the time the Mays came in. He did not know quite what he expected to find in his wife's parents, but he was prepared for people who would be rather triumphant, rather possessive, conventionally horrified by the haste; and pretending to be on their guard against him for their daughter's sake; at the same time, to receive him avariciously into full family favour, for he would have been a fool not to know that they must count him as an extremely eligible.

But he was not prepared at all for the two small, slim, shy, elderly people who entered the room, hand in hand, like two children, just as they had been sitting side by side, in his big car, which had been sent to meet them.

He did not know that they always held hands whenever they were near each other, and that they had practically no faculty for calculation, either in terms of eligibility or in other profit.

They were extraordinarily shabby, and at the same time extraordinarily graceful and gracious. They wore their nondescript clothes as if clothes did not matter, and indeed, on them, clothes had no importance at all; and while they were half afraid of what they might find, yet they came to it with a kind of benign dignity, and courage, and delight, expecting to be pleased.

That was their most attractive asset—this expectation of receiving and giving pleasure.

"My God, they're adorable people!" Dereham thought as his wife ran to meet them, and he hovered watchfully in the background.

"Is this Sir Hugo?" said the very small lady, after she had embraced her daughter, and then they met in the middle of the room, and he held that remarkably small hand in his. It was encased in a thread glove. Her large and radiant eyes, extraordinarily radiant for a woman of her age, looked up at him from her elf's face.

"We're so delighted," she said simply, "*so* delighted," and then her white-haired little husband held out a thin, fine hand too, echoing, "So very delighted with it all."

"That's most kind of you," Dereham said, at a loss. "You might have been extremely angry with me." They laughed together at that, and even their laughter was alike. They had grown alike. It was impossible and even a little terrifying, if one dared to think of it, to imagine them ever separated.

"But naturally," this little lady was continuing, in a voice that reminded one of quiet ripples of some little brook, "we expected Sonia to marry, didn't we, Gilly?"

"Of course we did," he affirmed.

Just for one moment they stood considering him together, and the clarity of their vision seemed otherworldly.

"And we knew when she married," Mrs. May said then, "that it would all be happy and right, and so it is."

Barton came in then with his cocktail tray. He had mixed his mildest after he had seen the unusual guests, but they hesitated.

"I've never had one," Mrs. May said. Her hand was back in her husband's. It was all beautifully absurd.

"Take one, dearest," he encouraged her dreamily. "It's nice to have something new." With their free hands each took a cocktail and sipped.

"We don't see many new things," he added to his tall son-in-law. They were all seated, the Mays side by side on a chesterfield; Sonia on the big floor cushion near them, hugging her knees and looking entirely unsophisticated even in Partner's frock; Dereham in an easy-chair nearby. Sonia would not let him stand another minute, nor wait upon any one. Her eyes had signalled him that he must take care. Under the direction of those eyes, he relaxed to please her, and felt at once an alien peace, but amusement too.

"You know," he said, "I was really quite disappointed when Sonia told me that you would not stay with us for a few days," and queerly enough he was now quite disappointed, for they came as a revelation to him, a reminder of things so naïve and sweet, things that he had dropped behind him long ago, even before he had emerged from boyhood, and looking at them he thought, "Yet they're real. They're just as real in their way as the rest of us. There is something else besides muck and greed in the world."

The little white-haired man was courteously disclaiming the possibility of their ever coming to stay.

"We should love to see you at our own little house in Devon, but my wife and I never stay anywhere except at home, do we, dearest?"

"Never," she explained firmly, if with a trifling anxiety as to what this son-in-law would think of their absurd habits. The great son-in-law was continuing, however, unknown to them, to find in them new perfections. They were entirely unavaricious, entirely unimpressed by wealth and prestige, entirely content. Wonderful people.

"We should love you to come to us," Mrs. May echoed her husband. "Though, of course, it is very tiny, only three bedrooms. Gilly and I have one, and our little maid has another, and then Sonia had the third, but Sonia's bed is very narrow, very narrow indeed. You'd be *rather* large," she apologised, measuring him with childish eyes.

"I should stay at some pub," Dereham said hastily, "I'm ever such a good son-in-law. I should never break in on such a family reunion as that. I should just sit round the corner, and ask you to parties." Again they gazed at him.

"You're better than I hoped," said Mrs. May, delighted, "Better than I hoped! Isn't he, Gilly?"

He nodded.

"Yes," he said, "better than we could have hoped."

"He *understands*."

The next moment they had him confounded.

"Sonia," said her mother, "has such worldly ideas—we've always told her she was much too worldly, haven't we, Gilly?"

"We have."

"She hasn't always understood, have you, Sonia, dear? Sometimes she's thought us very silly, haven't you, Sonia darling? She couldn't understand——"

"Our secrets," said the white-haired dreamer.

"But now," said Mrs. May, "she will."

Dereham looked very quickly at his wife, but distinguished no heartache in her laughter.

That was as it should be. She must never care.

It was as well, maybe, after all, that these two spinners of fairy tales were not going to stay long under that roof.

Yet, somehow, they lived their fairy tales, it seemed . . .

That luncheon was entirely contrary to any ideas which Dereham might have preconceived. The two charming people might be astoundingly unworldly, and yet contradictorily enough, he saw that they would have been entirely at home under any conditions, and with any kind of people. They had the adaptability of children, but the wisdom of seers. No perceptive mind would ever have said of them after being five minutes in their company, "These are two simpletons," or, much less, "These are two fools." They belonged everywhere; as much to the town as the country, and as much to heaven as to earth, and they wanted nothing from him. Indeed, what could they want?

He began to wish that he could do things for them; that they had come with outstretched hands, expectant, so that he could reward them—for what?

For giving him Sonia?

It was only his hatred of sympathy and pity which made him adhere to his former resolution not to tell them any of the circumstances of that marriage, which had seemed to them so natural a thing. For at that table they all seemed back in the nursery, and confidences were in order. They would not have been dismayed if he confided in them, though perhaps it might have a little grieved them to know that this was not the love match of their radiant belief.

They would probably have cried: "It will all come right!"

They were ridiculous, yet real.

Then during a lull in that happy talk Gilbert May said, with dignity:

"We have already to thank you very much, Hugo—if I may call you Hugo—for letting your wife," there were smiles all round the table now, except on Sonia's face, "come to our rescue with a very magnificent cheque."

"And we didn't thank you, at the time, yesterday," his wife added.

"There's nothing to thank me for," Dereham said. "It is Sonia's own money."

"We guessed that," Mrs. May murmured, and she smiled at him.

"It will be Sonia's own home," said her father, and now a touch of boyish pride informed him. "We shall settle it on her instantly, Hugo, so that you may be satisfied the money has not really—not really been lost to you."

"Father!" cried Sonia, delighted and astounded.

He raised a thin hand: "One of the little things you don't understand about us, my dear. We are foolish, perhaps, with our own money, but when it is a question of other people's, that is different. I assure you, Hugo, the cottage will be Sonia's—settled at once—I've asked all about that sort of thing already—to come to her at our death."

"Only we never want to die!" cried his wife urgently.

Even they could not be unaware of the dark little pause that fell. Then Dereham said:

"No, don't die!"

And they smiled again. Sonia smiled—no heartache there!

"Wonderful people," he thought.

They were not even going to ask about settlements; they would not pry into a single detail; their delicacy

was transcendent; they accepted any explanation vouchsafed of any miracle, with entire graciousness. Remarkable people!

"You didn't just give the money away, did you, father?" Sonia asked anxiously, and they reassured her in unison.

"And, Hugo," said the most incongruous of fathers-in-law, turning to him, "I've brought you my complete set of notes on that wonderful place of yours, Fennimore. I have been adding to them these last few days since Sonia has left us, and I hope you will find them useful. Please accept anything I can do." And he added shyly, "I left them in a parcel on the table in the hall."

Dereham remembered that it was a long while since he had met people who loved giving.

"I am grateful," he said. "They will be invaluable, but weren't you incorporating them in something of your own?"

"No, no," his father-in-law said vaguely. "I had no definite plan. I never have. But if I had one, I should ask you to take my notes instead."

They were not going to stay long, it seemed, but were catching a train back to Lulham at four o'clock. They continued to be the most modest of parents-in-law. They were delighted to be shown round the house after lunch, but they didn't expect it, and it was only as they left that tiny Mrs. May, her hand again in the hand of her small husband, made the single embarrassing remark of the whole day with the utmost simplicity:

"When there's a lovely baby, Hugo, there will be plenty of room for *that*. We can at least have baby," she spoke as if the baby were already a visible person, "to stay with us."

Hand in hand they went dreamily out. When the car had driven away, they left behind them a strange silence, and in their separate ways, both husband and

wife were hurt, and shocked, and thrilled, over that so simple, so homely, hope.

It was Sonia who spoke first:

"I'll take dad's notes and go through them, Hugo, and see exactly where they will fit in. I'll work on it till dinner."

She moved quickly to the door, and he thought: "She is always escaping me." They had come back together to this room after seeing her parents away, but it was impossible that they should talk any more just now. Besides, tears that would not be fought back had sprung to her eyes; tears of amazement and confusion and bewilderment. She had not the least inkling of an idea how to approach this husband of hers on the subject of the strangeness of their relationship. It had not seemed so very strange when she had entered into it—this marriage; but now, already, within twenty-four hours, she felt it to be cruel and impossible. She had to reach for the door-knob through a haze of tears.

"Oh, very well; work!" she heard Dereham's voice reply almost savagely behind her.

Always escaping from him! Always!

He stood quite still for a few minutes before he left the drawing-room too, to shut himself into the library. He waited, in fact, until the door of that little office room at the back of the hall should have closed behind his wife.

In the library, he sat down at his writing-table and put his head in his hands. He told himself: "Can't alter things now, for such a short time. She could never care, and a damned good job too, and a promise is a promise. I'll keep mine."

Honour was honour. How that little white-haired, scholarly man, dreamer as he was, had sprung to facts when money was in question! "Other people's money" mattered. So he had said very simply. His own was

not so important. He reversed the usual dictum of the world, and went back to the clean honesty of the uncorrupted child. "Other people's money," Dereham muttered to himself. There was something he also had to rearrange about money. And he picked up the telephone receiver as savagely as he had spoken to Sonia.

"That you yourself, Follet?" he said when he had dialled the number and received a reply. "This is Dereham."

What comfortable suave voices lawyers had in which to discuss matters that were uncomfortable, and far from suave.

"Oh yes, Sir Hugo. How are you? Lady Dereham well, I trust?"

"It is about Lady Dereham that I want to see you, Follet. Can you come straight along to my house?"

The lawyer could, and did.

"What do you think of the settlement I made, Follet?" Dereham said harshly. "Say what you like."

Prefacing his reply with a deprecating gesture:

"Very meagre," the lawyer answered. "Very meagre, indeed. You surprised me. May I suggest that it would have surprised most wives?"

"I believe my wife," said Dereham steadily, "to be entirely untroubled by all that sort of thing."

"Lady Dereham is a wonderful woman then."

"Yes, she is wonderful," said Dereham still harshly. In his mind he was still thinking unconsciously: "Always escaping me. Always." It was like a theme in his brain.

"At the time," the lawyer said, "I really thought, Sir Hugo, that she should have been represented. One did not know on first hearing of your intentions exactly what the case would turn out to be, but as soon as I met Lady Dereham I realised that she must be a young lady with background, and it seemed that there should be some one acting on her side. Has she parents?"

"They don't come into it," said Dereham in the same voice. "And they care even less than she does."

"Lady Dereham has, then, remarkable parents."

"Yes," Dereham agreed. "The parents are remarkable too."

"You want to increase your wife's settlements, Sir Hugo?"

"Yes, Follet, I want to leave her every penny of my personal money, tied up very tightly upon herself."

"No re-marriage condition?" the lawyer asked.

For a minute Dereham sat quite silent, knowing that it was unreasonable in him to feel the anger he felt at the vision which that question conjured up. It was the vision of Sonia re-married, making a real marriage the second time; marrying Francis Selwinn. He saw it all clearly because he knew Selwinn, and the significance of that thankful look on a bride's face, when she had seen who was making the third at dinner last evening, multiplied itself a thousandfold in Dereham's thoughts. She was almost ready now to be in love with Selwinn, probably she was in love with him. He had the reputation for attracting women with devastating and magic swiftness, and he had already on certain occasions engaged her interest—one could guess about that!

"Well, she shall have him," Dereham thought as he sat there. "He could make her very happy if he wanted to, and who wouldn't? But he could make her very unhappy too."

It seemed to him inevitable, however, that when he was out of the way those two would marry. If he gave Follet a hint of it, that shrewd man of affairs would only think such conclusions were ludicrously premature—"We lawyers don't imagine," he would say—but Dereham knew!

People spoke sometimes of the clear vision of the dying—perhaps that was what sharpened his sight now.

He did not know what to do for the best, save what he was now doing ; to make her entirely desirable to Selwinn and yet to safeguard her in the way money can safeguard, should unhappiness ensue.

His former hard mastery of situations was at fault, and not for a moment did he even glimpse the fact that he was jealous ; that in a blaze of irrational jealousy he was doing this.

Follet, studying him carefully and unobtrusively, knew it ; jealousy was a symptom he recognised in his clients, easily and often. "He's as jealous as hell already. Of whom ?"

Then Dereham answered :

"Certainly not ; no re-marriage conditions. A woman should be free. I hate this hand-from-the-grave business."

"Good," Follet said. "Good. So do we. Very well, I am glad to prepare the settlement on these new and happier terms. And now how are you ?"

"I'm feeling very well, thanks," Dereham answered. "A bit of an attack last night, but nothing like I've had before."

"The attacks are not more frequent, I hope ?"

"No, they're decreasing ; saving up for the Grand Slam." He smiled sardonically.

"I hope not ; I hope not," Follet protested.

"Hopes are of no use to me, my dear chap," Dereham said briefly, and they shook hands and he was alone again, to think.

This lovely young wife of his . . . Why shouldn't they have a honeymoon of sorts ; a barren affair, but still a day or two tinged with the romance that might have been ?

It would be a slight rest for both of them. To-morrow he would take her out of London. He would take her to Fennimore.

CHAPTER IX

IT was at least like the promise of a honeymoon. There was the big ruined house, built heavily of stone; windows of the west wing looking over mountains, windows of the north wing looking down into the river that rushed by. She had been glad to come, he thought, though she had said persistently, as if it were necessary to find a business-like reason for it:

"We shall be able to verify all sorts of things for the book, Hugo."

For the first time since he had begun that labour of pride and love, he nearly damned the book. Never had he so wanted to be entirely human. They had brought Barton with them beside the chauffeur in the car, but when the question of Sonia's maid had arisen, she had simply laughed at it.

"You know, Hugo, I never had a lady's maid in my life till I married you."

There were caretakers in the house, a gardener and his wife, who, with Barten, were enough staff for the two days which were all that they were going to spend at Fennimore.

Sonia herself had said, "You're not to be away from your doctor for any longer than that, Hugo, no matter how well you think you feel." And again, under her anxious orders, he had that subtle thrill of pleased humility which he had felt in the painful dawn after their wedding night, when she had ministered to him in his anguished sickness. All men liked the woman they loved to order them about! It gave them the most delicious amusement and gratification, almost more than when they in their turn took the rôle of

commander. He knew the weakness, and smiled to himself dourly over it.

"It won't matter if I love her," he thought, "she will never know."

So they walked about the lovely desolate weed-strewn grounds, in only small chosen corners of which could the one gardener keep order, and talked impersonally.

Yet, even into this so impersonal talk and planning—"I expect you will do this, Hugo!" and "What do you think of changing that, Sonia?"—there crept the bitter personal knowledge that this was all abortive in so far as he himself would never live to see the restoration.

By and by, as they sat on the great grey wall of the natural moat made on the north side by the river, he forced himself to speak of Selwinn.

"You realise, Sonia, that Francis will have this place as well as the Hilton Square house? We are doing this for Francis."

"We are doing it for Fennimore," she amended quickly.

"And Fennimore is for Francis," he insisted. "Do you think he will live here much, Sonia?"

"Who wouldn't?" she breathed in wonder, looking over the soft green valley, and up to the purple shades of summer mountains against the sky.

"Would you?" he countered.

"I should love to live here!" she cried.

It was certainly premature to reply to her, "Well, no doubt you will, with Francis; for without your money, he will never now be able to keep it up, and without him as husband, you won't come here.

"She will want him as a husband," he kept thinking. "Perhaps she wants him now."

They had dinner in the old banqueting hall; bare floor; tremendous oak table on trestles, which was six hundred years old; dilapidated skin rugs; rusty

mediaeval lances on the grim walls between family portraits by the first portrait painters. The windows were uncurtained, and those small deep embrasured windows looked out over the river, with, beyond it, the twilit valley and the dimming hills.

They made a long meal of dinner, sitting talking quietly, lighted only by huge tapers in rough iron brackets thrust into the walls, but before they rose from the table, the moon was helping, and also before they rose from the table, Dereham knew why he had brought his wife down to see the ruined old house. It was sheer sentimentality such as he would have derided so short a time as a week ago. It was a chaotic delirium of the emotions, and he had let himself drop into it as a man wishing to drown among warm waves. He had wanted the sight of Sonia in this house, just because it was his, and so was she. Only, she was not truly his, and he himself had built between them the barricade.

She must be very glad of that barricade, poor little bride.

And he had brought her, also, because he wanted to imagine her here in the future.

He would have despised himself if he could not have faced that.

"With Selwinn? Yes, with Selwinn. Why don't I stand up to it?" he thought fiercely. "It is the inevitable." And then as Barton put before them the dish of mediocre nectarines which were all that the gardener could manage to grow, in such glass as he still had at his disposal and left them alone, Dereham knew that he would indeed stand up to the inevitable.

He would fight it all over again.

What was that Follet had asked him? He had asked him whether those diabolical attacks were more frequent, and Dereham had been able to answer truly,

"No." But was Nature, in the devilish mood which she kept for men like him, not saving for that Grand Slam?

He began to think to himself very cautiously, because he feared to think too much, and yet with a more savage resolution than he had ever brought to bear upon anything, that he was a little better, and that he would be better still.

He began in that moment very fiercely to will himself to live.

All the next day, in the quiet and the peace, finding new treasure together, making hourly fresh discoveries about the old house, walking and talking and knowing an extraordinary new happiness in quiet hours when they didn't walk and hardly talked at all, with work put aside, Dereham held out to himself this promise of life. Life was intensely precious. It was not to be held lightly as he had held it hitherto; it was to be saved and guarded, and rejoiced in. He had a new vision of a tremendous future. He slept soundly and easily.

"I feel better, Barton," he said questioningly to Barton when he came down to breakfast on the second morning. And the servant replied with quiet confidence:

"You are better, Sir Hugo."

"I couldn't be really, you know," Dereham said, but Barton hazarded:

"There's strange things happen, sir, very strange things." Then at the sideboard serving his master, Barton hazarded further: "I must hope for her ladyship's sake as well as for yours, Sir Hugo, that we'll see a miracle, as no doubt the doctors will call it."

"For her ladyship's sake," He reflected that Barton knew nothing, but that only himself, and Sonia, and Francis Selwinn held the secret of that marriage. Life tangled in his mind again. "I ought to die," he said to himself rather grimly, "I practically promised to."

And then he said to himself, trying to shake off all the hope and the illusion of the night before, " I am going to die. Next time Nature, a devil if ever there was one, will hold all the trumps."

They left Fennimore at mid-day for the long swift drive back to town.

His decisions on living, and his furies at dying, would not desert him. He had all the fighting instinct roused in him ; and suddenly on one of these flashes of inspiration which come to the rescue of men in grave danger, he recalled, just as they drove into London, the name of a famous Italian doctor, who had set up practice in Harley Street only three months ago, with whom nearly every medico in London was in complete disagreement, and yet who had begun to cure what had been diagnosed as incurable in many cases. He was under the suspicion of charlatanry. He had been openly called a quack. But he was young, he was new, he was uncannily accurate in all his findings so far, and London was beginning seriously to notice him, " I'll go to-day," Dereham thought, as soon as he woke the next morning in his own austere bedroom in Hilton Square.

They had arrived home at midnight ; had champagne and sandwiches in the library, and this time it had been he who said to her :

" Now go to bed and sleep late, my dear. Just for once you take my husbandly orders." She had laughed very tremulously.

He did not know how these ordinary smiling words had thrilled her, but in the morning he could still remember the tremolo in that laugh. He rang the bell and sent a message to her through her maid, that that morning also they would not work.

Three idle days, two at Fennimore and now another !

He himself was down early. He had a secret pleasure in breakfasting alone this morning, both for the reason that she had obeyed him, and had put off again becoming the competent little machine which seemed to be her aim, and because of the anticipations of going to see this new doctor.

He had told Barton to ring him up an hour before, and the hard-working practical Italian medico, setting apparently no value on professional humbug, had answered as readily as would any poorer general practitioner, that he would be delighted to see Sir Hugo Dereham at noon.

Dereham did another thing before he left the house that morning—which he did without seeing Sonia—and that was to telephone to Selwinn.

"Come to lunch, Francis, won't you?"

"Like to, old man," Francis' voice answered with alacrity.

Dereham was not deliberately sure of just why he wanted Selwinn in the house when he should return from the doctor, but he did want him, because there was still the business of Selwinn and Sonia. He had to see them together again. There would be a tremendous lot to be deliberated—yes, and arranged if . . .

He did not want to see Sonia before he left; he would find them together, talking, by and by. They would enjoy their half-hour together before luncheon, before they were interrupted.

He allayed in some part that primeval jealousy that would rise as soon as he thought of these things by insisting to himself that he would concentrate on nothing but the Harley Street adventure. For now it had become an adventure, a great, if not altogether a happy one. He buried himself in his club until it was time to go.

The Italian said, a professional smile somewhere in the dark opaqueness of his eyes :

" I'm very happy to tell you, Sir Hugo, that your previous diagnosis was emphatically wrong, and I shall not add, 'in my opinion.' I repeat definitely that it was emphatically wrong."

Dereham sat quite still.

It had been a long consultation, with a new heart test by electro-cardiograph.

" You would be told," the Italian went on, " that you were suffering from malarial valvular disease of the heart. You've had, we will admit, most of the signs. Shortness of breath, severe pain on exertion, alarming attacks, and you have suffered a good deal in the past from malaria, I gather. All those facts are very evident. But it is the muscle of your heart which is damaged, not the valves, and under the treatment and the rest you have had, the muscle is recovering. With more rest and no more malaria, with better health all round, Sir Hugo, you will recover entirely within the next few months."

So he was out again in the street, where the sunshine was dazzling, where everything dazzled, in a way extraordinarily exhilarating and new. So might a man escape from prison! It was revealed to him with absolute certainty that the doctor was right; that this was the true diagnosis; that life was his. He signalled a taxicab and gave the Hilton Square address.

He was very late for luncheon, but Sonia and Francis had waited for him. They were sitting under a sun umbrella in the paved garden, drinking cocktails; Francis enjoying Barton's best and stiffest concoction; Sonia with something charmingly pretty but non-alcoholic which already the butler delighted to invent for her. She looked lovelier than ever. Those two days' rest had imposed a bloom and freshness even upon her

own young bloom and freshness; she looked a happy girl as she smiled up into Selwinn's eyes.

Dereham stood for just a moment on the threshold of the library before he went out to join them. What were they talking about so engrossedly, so secretly, so happily? The word "secretly," stupid as it was, flashed into his mind, and if the emotion that took him at the sight of them had been less heady, he would have known it to be the stupidity that it was. But almost immediately he caught the word Fennimore, and then: "Terrific task . . . restoration . . . a life work . . ."

That was Selwinn speaking.

So they were already discussing together the future of the old house, and of their mutual fortunes? They would not have said aloud to each other the actual thought that lay in their minds and shone in their eyes, every time they glanced at each other, but they would be looking forward with happiness and with certainty—this handsome pair.

"Hullo," said Dereham from the threshold of the windows, and they turned to see him.

His wife's face quietened. It was as if the light went out of it; as if she were recalled by his mere appearance to the expediencies of the unattractive present. Oh, he knew, he knew! And then Barton was following him out, with a cocktail for him. He tossed it straight down.

"Hugo," said his wife quickly, "should you? You ought to take such care of your digestion." "Digestion," he echoed scornfully. "What does digestion matter?"

"But it matters a lot."

"Oh, no," he said, "a man with a short time before him should do anything he damn well pleases, my dear."

"But you have a reason," she began.

"A reason for discipline," he finished for her. "You keep me at it, don't you . . . dear? Doesn't she keep me at it, Francis?"

This was quite a new mood to her. He had a reason for discipline, and he had enforced it upon himself obediently because of the stringent need for economising strength, and for forcing opportunities for that work he had been so set on finishing within a given time. He put his empty glass down upon the garden table.

" Francis," he said casually, " I've a little something to say to Sonia, in private. You don't mind? . . . A minute only—it's not of such importance to her that it need take long. But, if you'll buzz off—just a minute."

Selwinn always agreed; never quarrelled; never deputed nor struggled. " Without any kind of contention over anything," Dereham thought, " he's going to have it all."

He was going to have Sonia.

He was agreeing: " Why, of course. Rather! I'll go and mix one of my own."

He had left them. Just so, he went through the world, mixing the blend of life he wanted with other people's things . . . Dereham threw away the paltry sentiment, and turned to his wife.

" Discipline? " he repeated.

She looked at him, wide-eyed.

" All that's over," he said, laughing, and yet in his laughter there was not much mirth. " Over," he repeated. " I've just been to that new Italian fellow who has set all the London doctors by the ears." His wife's lips parted. She gasped because her heart was beating so terrifically, but it seemed as if he did not notice how eagerly her eyes were fixed upon him. He was explaining very carefully, prefacing the explanation with an apology:

" Sorry to be late for lunch." Her little involuntary gesture put that aside. He went on: " But as a matter of fact I spent nearly two hours with this doctor fellow.

I've had a new test—electro-cardiograph process or something of the sort. I have got a new verdict."

"Please, Hugo?" she said, recovering her breath.

Why did he wait before telling her all? Why did he look at her so? She whispered, "There's hope?"

"Bags of hope," Dereham laughed. "It is the heart muscle, not the valves. I have been feeling better. I think it's you, my dear." He made the words into an unkindness. "This rest and the care I am having," he explained, "ensures recovery, if I have got any sense. And a man who has thought he was in my fix can raise a hell of a lot of sense to meet the doctors half-way."

She began: "Oh, Hugo!" and put her fingers against her mouth. Words that she must not utter were quivering on it and had to be kept back by physical force. Her knees were weak, her bones were like water, and she sank into one of the chairs at the little table under the sun umbrella.

He was going to live! To live!

He had said that his news would not be very important to her.

Her head was bent, so that her husband could not see her face, and a heavy curl of hair fell across it. Under the trembling curl she looked up and saw Selwinn lounging about just inside the window of the library.

"Francis!" she called. It was an overwrought cry.

"Don't tell him now," Dereham forbade her quickly and savagely.

"Not . . ."

"No," he said.

Selwinn reached them, sharply observant, outwardly carefree, as ever.

"All over?"

"All over," Dereham said, smiling.

"That's his wickedest smile," Selwinn thought to himself.

And he moved just slightly so as almost to cover Sonia. There had been some sort of unpleasantness? He was wide awake to it, and to the fact of her emotion. Old Hugo was such a funny fellow, and she had married him, of course, just for the normal woman's reasons of avarice—not that there mightn't be a romantic pity mingled—and betting on her early escape, a rich widow. But Hugo himself had made the bargain, and need not, Selwinn said to himself, play the little girl up like this.

But regardless of Selwinn's quick attempt to cover her, which Hugo had noted and interpreted instantly, Sonia was betraying herself with no idea that there was more than one interpretation to put upon her gesture; in fact, she had no ideas at all at this overwhelming moment save one. She could have fainted with joy but must not. She put her hands over her face to hide it, and rose, and stood quite still for a moment.

"Oh," she said. "Oh."

Selwinn touched her on the arm, only because her husband didn't move. It was a difficult moment even for his tact, and he had no idea of the nature of the trouble between them.

Hugo was jealous? "That would be damn funny," Selwinn thought, "and it might serve him right."

"Bride! bride!" said he, affecting a coaxing astonishment.

Sonia dropped her hands and looked at him; tears were running down her cheeks; they stared at each other. "Hugo was just saying something very, very important!" she stormed. Her voice roused them both like a challenge; though Selwinn remained without enlightenment.

There was a handkerchief tucked into her sleeve, and she found it and in another moment she had wiped her tears away. Her face was left clear and tense. She

smiled uncertainly, and then she walked past them both through the library, through the hall into the dining-room, where Barton was holding open the door. The two men followed her.

CHAPTER X

SHE wanted to tell Selwinn all that had happened out there in the garden, in that brief moment while he left them. After all, he had been her friend since, so brief a while ago she had come adventuring into this new world of new people, among whom only he seemed kind and easy and wise. But there would be no opportunity until she could see him quite alone. And as he looked from one to the other, during that luncheon, and forced the conversation along carefully and agreeably and amusingly, as he had done on the strange occasion of the dinner on their wedding evening, Selwinn thought: " Better not stay very long perhaps. Dear little bride must fight it out alone."

Such heart as he had felt tenderly for her.

It was one of their usual simple lunches, exquisite but short, thank God! Three courses only, including the savoury, and as the butler handed that, Selwinn said:

" I'm playing polo this afternoon; unusual luxury for me, but a man has fallen out, and I am riding his ponies. I suppose you don't feel inclined to drive down and see the game? "

Sonia answered quickly, crumbling her toast:

" Oh no, I've had a long time idle and there's a great deal to do for Hugo." Into the strange mixture of joy and fear in her mind weaved ultra sensitive, almost childish thoughts, of how she must more than ever go

on working, working, fulfilling the task for which alone he had married her; that less than ever now must she assume airs and rights; she would not say, as no doubt he expected her to do: "Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful for us both," and then he would think how false that was; or "Then, Hugo, there's just all the time in the world! We can relax now, can't we?" That would be just what he would be expecting her to do!

Then she heard his voice retracting her answer to Selwinn.

"Jolly good idea, Francis, we'll drive you down, and take you back. We can easily wait till you've changed. Sonia has actually never been to Hurlingham yet, and why should she or I work this grand afternoon? That book may be an occupation for my dotage yet." He laughed, his eyes shone, but not with amusement. "That might still be an old man's job."

"Hope it will," Selwinn duly answered.

He didn't listen very particularly. Poor old Hugo was a queer chap. One could understand it, and it was of no use analysing the variable moods of an invalid. He said:

"That will be jolly fine! I hope I'll put up a good show. I haven't played since last season, and then only once. I shall never be able to afford it on my own again." Of course he knew that not to be the truth, and no doubt old Hugo too was thinking of the lying futility of those words, but they were polite and considerate, the sort of thing one ought to say. One could not very well sit here and prophesy: "Next season I shall be playing all right again on your money, Hugo. Dead men's shoes."

How quiet the bride was. What had they said to each other out there in the garden, when Hugo had asked him so peremptorily to leave them? And how more and more lovely she was! He was thinking of her

just those thoughts with which Dereham credited him, but he thought them tenderly with a degree of seriousness which could surprise even himself.

"The car in half an hour, I suppose?" Dereham said.

"Not a minute later, old man. You can be ready, Sonia?"

"I'll be ready," she said. Except for her assent to his invitation, those were the first words that she had spoken at the luncheon table.

"Wear something nice," Dereham said; "I don't believe you shopped half lavishly enough the other day."

Again he cursed himself for the trend of his thoughts. She had been thinking, he surmised: "There is no reason to buy many gay clothes. I'll save the money. A nest egg—for he hasn't dealt too generously with me; he has been mean." And perhaps because women were strange, cold, cruel creatures when they liked, her thoughts might have turned to black; black furs framing her fair face, and fair hair.

She rose and left them.

She came down again half an hour later in the more expensive of the two day frocks she had bought at Partner's. The colour was blue, neither dark nor light; matching her eyes exactly. The hat matched too, and she was exquisitely gloved and shod. She preceded them, still with hardly more than a vague smile by way of further comment, out to the car.

All the afternoon she sat beside her husband, or strolled with him about the grounds, or had tea and strawberries with him, in a blur of exquisite and painful emotions all covered by that cloak of quietness uhder which she hid herself.

She saw polo for the first time, and could find no enjoyment or meaning in the spectacle which might otherwise have delighted her. Lean fit men, galloping ponies clicking sticks, and hooves; the incessant move-

ment of spectators all about her ; pretty women, pretty gowns ; people coming up to be presented to her, and people congratulating Dereham on his improved looks—all this made a mere senseless kaleidoscope of colour and sound in her mind. She could think one thing and one thing only, " How he must regret, how he must want to be rid of me !" She faced people's curiosity, smiling, answering, holding her head up, declaring to her husband, in reply to his repeated questions, that she was enjoying it all.

That indefinable nuance was in his voice again, that note of unkindness which had so troubled her in him at first, but which for the last two weeks had seemed to be lulled away. She could not wonder. For how he must be regretting !

Selwinn joined them again, changed into the light-coloured tropical tweed in which he had lunched with them. His tailor was his best ally. He was healthy and glowing with pleasure and exercise. His eyes went straight to Sonia. She was too pale. What was the matter with her ? She should have been enjoying it all, silly child. He must already begin to see whether he couldn't perhaps lighten her life a little, because he would like to know exactly how she thought of him.

" Enjoy the strawberries, Sonia ? " he asked.

" They're the best I've ever had," she assured him. She had seen without seeing, heard without hearing, eaten without tasting, yet she must hold up her head.

" Ramonde's over there," he said, " with the Murray crew. You remember the Murrays ? " he appealed openly to her. " They were at the Country Club that night we went down and swam, just before Hugo put the chains of slavery upon you."

He laughed. But things looked grim, and why on earth did Hugo watch his young wife so closely to-day ?

" I'd like to see Miss Allett," Sonia said, but merely

because she had nothing else to say. She wanted to meet no one, do nothing. She saw before her a vast void which surely nothing would ever fill again. Her husband put his hand on her arm. She restrained herself from starting violently, for it was the first sign of affection that he had ever shown, and of course, she corrected herself, it was not affection, it was merely a gesture made because of other people. She couldn't count that time when, at dawn together, he had stroked her hair, could she?

"No," she thought, "it is all nothing."

"Come along," he said.

They went over and talked for a while with Ramonde and her friends, who were still lingering over tea and strawberries.

Ramonde simply threw herself at Dereham, though even to herself she could not have said why, save that he happened to be the most affluent and best looking man near her. There was no other reason left to her, for he had married this little country girl, who had been so much cleverer than all the women in London put together; who looked so little and young, and innocent in that blue gown, but who had beaten them all. So quietly, so softly, she had captured this matrimonial prize, and soon she would be that most enviable of all women, a rich widow. For, of course, the little creature had played her hand; of course the settlements were lavish, and one had heard vaguely, having instituted a channel of inquiry through servants that, the very morning after the wedding, her parents had rushed up from Devon to confirm matters.

Still, Ramonde flung herself at Hugo Dereham that afternoon, and deliberately forcing himself to play up to her, Dereham responded. She had never known him to be responsive to her perfectly open enticements before, and an unholy joy seized her.

One never knew. There were divorce courts; rich people unlocked prison gates easily.

Selwinn's manner towards Sonia was very, very protective; people noticed it.

Sonia thought to herself when they were in their car again driving home, "All the time he has really wanted her; he pretended he didn't. He even deceived me. He would never let her see, because he thought he was going to die. But it was Ramonde whom he really wanted for a wife."

"You'll drop me?" Francis was suggesting.

So seldom since her marriage three weeks ago had she spoken as Lady Dereham, but she issued an invitation now.

"No, Mr Selwinn, I—you must come in with us, because I want to talk to you. The car can wait and take you to your flat afterwards."

He was amazed, and pleased too, though he hid his pleasure.

"Thank you, Sonia. That O.K., Hugo?"

"O.K. for me," Dereham answered in an American drawl.

It was seven o'clock when they stopped in Hilton Square.

They went all together into the drawing-room, Selwinn not quite sure of the situation. About this house, since he had arrived that morning before lunch, there had hung an air of mystery; there was a new motive.

He suggested that they should come with him that evening to a theatre.

"Dine at my club," he urged. "Ladies' annexe is just open. We've had to give way like all the rest. Dinner will be fairly good. We could make it by a quarter to eight, if her ladyship will hurry."

Barton had come in with his tray and gone out again.

"Shall I cancel dinner here, Hugo?" Sonia asked,

and still she had that little air of being Lady Dereham in her own house. Her husband looked at her in a deliberate way.

"No," he said, "there is something I too want to say to you this evening, Sonia. A little talk, of a certain importance. Dine with us, instead, Francis; don't bother to dress. Dine dirty, and go on dirty to some show if you want to. Another cocktail?"

"Yes," Selwinn said to both suggestions.

It occurred to him on that word, how good and easy life was—even if impecunious—for the incorrigible bachelor. How convenient it was to say "Yes or No" at a whim to any sudden invitation, without consulting a wife. Beautifully, sybaritically selfish—and he knew it.

Old Hugo was, by the look of it, finding married life a bit irksome—even with this sweet and generous-hearted little girl.

She was sweet and generous-hearted, thank heaven. Because—no use fighting it—the best thing for all concerned, when poor old Hugo died, and since he was to inherit Fennimore and this home too, would be for them to marry.

People would even expect it.

He would be very, very careful with her if she would be very, very lenient with him.

"Thanks very much," he added.

Sonia went slowly to the door, murmuring about something comfortable, although between the sort of trim frock she was wearing and a full evening gown, she possessed nothing as yet.

But as if miraculously consequent upon those murmured words, when she reached her rooms, she found the French maid in raptures over certain exotic garments which she was taking from a box with Partner's name scrawled across it, in a golden replica of his own signature.

She explained that some things had been sent for her ladyship just to look at.

That undeviating principle of not spending much of Hugo's money which had informed her up till now, weakened in Sonia. She was wearied by strain, and Hugo himself had asked her that day to look "nice." She didn't trouble to think if it were at his own instigation or Ramonde's, that Partner had sent these cunning clothes, but the maid was just then holding out the most beautiful of trousered *negligées*, such a thing as she had never seen or dreamed of before. She knew instantly that it was just her size—Partner would have remembered that!

She nodded, and set her lips tight upon decision.

The maid followed her into the bedroom with the frail and shimmering suit over her arm. It was in the softest Persian colours, modelled on the lines of the dress of an eighteenth century Persian boy, adapted by Paris, and adaptation and translation had been carried out with such genius that a little English girl could be ravishingly suited with it.

She did not share in the maid's raptures when she had put it on, but sat looking at herself strangely and quietly in the mirror.

What a different Sonia! What a languorous little creature! And she did not even think now of what would Lulham say if it could see her. Instead, she thought, "What would Ramonde say?"

The eyes that looked back at her, from the glass, were the eyes of a woman, not a girl; awake, quick, jealous and passionate. She turned away suddenly from those eyes and without another word to the maid, went down. She had only taken twenty minutes over that dressing, that transformation, and Dereham, who had gone up to change, had not yet returned to the drawing-room, although it was close upon their usual time for dinner.

Selwinn stood there alone, on the flower-banked hearth, deep in thought; so deep in thought that his cocktail glass was forgotten, and he had not even lighted a cigarette. He did not so much as notice her quiet entry until she was standing near him. Then he turned absently, and his eyes awoke to an amazed, a new and ardent admiration.

For in his resilient mind—ruefully as he would come to marital chains—she seemed already his, and her loveliness delighted him.

It had been a queer talk that he had had with Hugo, during the first few minutes after she had left them alone.

"I hope, Francis," Hugo had said, abruptly, "that you have really considered seriously how things stand?"

"Don't be morbid, old fellow," Selwinn protested.

"There is nothing particularly morbid about the truth," said Dereham, and he watched him. "You've known what the doctors' verdicts on me have been, ever since I came back to England. We've talked about it enough. You know Fennimore will come to you, and this house too; although there isn't enough money in the family estate to keep them up, without the personal fortune that I shall leave behind me." He spoke very deliberately. "That, of course, will go where you would expect it to go."

"Of course, old man."

"Well, where is that?" Dereham had pursued.

"To your wife," Selwinn had answered, properly.

Indeed, he would have been shocked had he known of the first settlement.

"Had you been thinking of all these things, Francis?"

"I never gave 'em a thought, dear fellow, unless you insisted," Selwinn lied.

It had been a proper and decent lie to tell; so he considered, but then left quite alone in the drawing-room

he had begun to ponder on exactly what Hugo meant. He answered his own question to himself. There seemed little doubt of what Hugo had been hinting at. "Executive turn of mind, damned executive," Selwinn had thought ruefully to himself, but rather pleasurably too.

It seemed cold-blooded of Hugo to be already arranging the life of his widow—for that was what the hints were coming to—but all he thought of was his old house; all he thought of was financing that; a mere flesh-and-blood girl could not count beside it.

He had been going to say—and had only postponed it: "You and Sonia had better get married presently; join forces."

To find Sonia suddenly standing beside him like that, looking beautiful as a dream, as Selwinn said to himself, was somehow a direct articulation of what had been as yet only half uttered.

No man's heart could help warming towards her.

So far he had resisted marrying for money, not merely through principle, not merely because of his own liking for freedom—one must forego something—but because, usually, the possible bride who would go with the money had always been definitely untempting to him.

He said aloud what he was thinking, because she would not guess its exact significance:

"Sonia, you are perfection." And he thought with a faint sigh, "Yes. Even as a wife."

"This is a very extravagant affair, Francis," she said seriously, her eyes wide, and lifting her arms the better to display the slim yet flowing lines of that suit.

"Bosh!" he answered, "spend money, my dear, spend, spend, spend. There couldn't possibly be a worthier cause than yourself."

Her arms dropped to her sides again.

"I wanted to ask you something, Francis," she said.

It was the first time she had used his Christian name. "And that is, what do people think of my marriage?"

"They think all wrong, my dear, of course." His eyes caressed her. "Sit down, Sonia." He drew her to a big couch near, so placed that when they seated themselves their backs were towards the door. "They don't imagine how awfully lucky old Hugo is, to have a girl like yourself beside him, to cheer up such time as he has got left."

"Oh, Francis," she said, "did you know that too?"

"That Hugo is to die? Yes, my dear, and when you married him, I knew that he had told you. It seemed a pretty grim position for a bride. But there is such a thing as being practical, dear girl—a little hard sense often carries you through a beastly situation—and you know you must make the very best of it. After all, when all the sadness is over——" and looking into her face it was revealed to him how sensitively she suffered this sadness. "Try not to feel so deeply, dear," he said rather breathlessly. And then, "You'll be a rich woman, you know. Hugo will provide for you very generously, as he ought."

"No!" she denied quickly. It was very strange sitting there with him, her only friend and confidant, and not to be able to tell him what she wished her husband had told him, that now it was to be life and not death. "No," she said again very quietly, "I wouldn't have married Hugo if I'd thought that. It would have seemed too horrible to me."

"*Horrible?*" he echoed.

She nodded.

"He told me exactly what he would leave me, Francis. £500, and £150 a year. It was far too much. I don't want anything—not *anything*—but I suppose men"—she chose her words—"men are proud about these things."

He heard her with unmixed astonishment.

So she didn't know of old Hugo's arrangements, which he must certainly have made, judging by the way he spoke just now!

He thought over that, realising that he would have to readjust even more thoroughly his first quite excusable ideas of her. By some hundredth chance she was really the sweet simple thing she appeared to be; really the brave bride of whom people had sniggered in his hearing, "That little country wench has been clever."

Just for a moment he reflected on the possibility that she was trying to find out from him if her position could not be amended, but whole-heartedly he repudiated the thought. She had wanted just what she said—"a talk." She must be very lonely, indeed, to approach him. Lonely—and wanting most naturally to alleviate that loneliness.

His laughing eyes were serious; humid, sentimental with the emotion which was the nearest to love that he ever achieved.

"Wa that all you wanted to talk to me about, Sonia?"

"Yes."

He put out a hand and covered her two hands, and held them.

"Let me do that," he said quickly. "I know you turned me down once before, but you didn't know me then, and it was before you were Lady Dercham, with all this around you," he glanced about the room, "to protect you from greedy fellows. Wealth does protect a woman marvellously, Sonia. Dear, I want you to consider me your friend to come to in all trouble; come and tell me if any one annoys you, or, if old Hugo worries you. I might even be able to help you with him."

"I need no one between Hugo and me, Francis."

"You're right," he said soothingly. "You're loyal! But Sonia, if people knew what you have just been telling me to be the facts, they would think of you more as a little victim, than an avaricious young woman, you know." He knew now far more about her future fortunes than did she. "You make me want to help you, dear, dear Sonia," he said very softly. "Do you know that you have made me love you?"

She had no time even to be disappointed in him, much else to reply, for she was conscious, without turning her head, of her own husband's presence.

Dereham had not meant to open the door so silently, nor to surprise them, nor to play the silly part of eavesdropper, but the door had opened without sound, and then he had stepped over the threshold on to one of the Persian rugs, spread on the parquet floor, so that his footfalls were muffled. There they were, sitting absorbed in each other, rapt, and he had heard Selwinn's vibrant low boice telling Sonia that he loved her.

He showed no sign of having overheard, but came round the chesterfield and stood surveying his wife.

"Gay plumage," he said. He had never seen her look as she looked now in this cleverest of all Partner's creations, which lent her such allure and sophistication. He thought," It won't take her long to learn! She's a woman like the rest."

"I have been very extravagant," she said, looking up at him.

"I don't mind," he answered. "Make hay while the sun shines."

And then he was bitterly ashamed of that, for he saw her face. "I'm sorry," he said. "A bad joke; not a joke at all, is it? Well, Francis, feeling stiff?"

"Not a bit. I had a hot bath as soon as I came off the ground."

"You had two good ponies," said Dereham.

She sat mute and beautiful between the two men, who could make such ordinary talk when—so she felt—such immense and vital affairs were in the melting pot. She knew Dereham would live; Selwinn didn't. Selwinn loved her; her husband didn't. Selwinn thought marriage had made her a rich woman; personally she was still poor and always would be.

What a relief it was that the mere routine of such an impeccably managed household could ease this strain by the simple announcement of dinner!

There was still something that Hugo wanted to say to her. That would be after Selwinn had gone. She knew as she took her place at the head of the table just why she had seized upon the extravagant creation she was wearing, as soon as she saw it in her maid's hands. She had broken through all the principles she had set herself, and put it on to gain courage. For he was stranger than ever to her now, this big dark husband, with his searchlight eyes.

They talked polo all through that short dinner—the two men; as if nothing else mattered in the immediate world, but she could not help the unwilling knowledge that between her and Selwinn there was a secret understanding, made by his declaration. Even down at home in Devon, it was known that single men could love married women. It was not impossible. She had no thought but that Selwinn's professed worship would be conducted from afar. She supposed it would make at best a warm background, in which he remained, adviser and friend. That she could ever give him love in return never entered her mind. She sat, listening to the men's talk, without sharing in it except by a monosyllable now and again, continuing to feel surprise at the harmony between them all. So much confusion of so many secrets, and yet this guileful harmony!

But because there was so much expectancy in the air, a pause must come, which heralded the break up of the trio.

Selwinn said no less suavely because he said it suddenly :

" I won't wait for coffee, Sonia, if you and Hugo will let me off, because I really am going to a vulgar show to-night, I think, with a man on leave, if I can get him. Though if you'd honoured us, we should have exchanged it for a different sort of thing."

He kissed her hand when he bent over it for, after all, poor old Hugo had practically given him a hint of how he would like things to happen, and there could now be no question of jealousy, for the queer chap did not love his wife at all.

It was strange that a man could not love her, however temporarily.

" Well, good-bye, Hugo," he said, straightening up, very debonnair, " see you again soon ? " Barton held open the door for him.

Again Dereham and Sonia were intimately alone at the dinner-table ; again it was one of those mellow hours with the desert before them, a vintage port on the table and candle light promising its continuing soft glow over any ensuing harshness. Yet to-night it was all different. Her husband was going to deal in truth to-night. Dare she deal in truth ? No, she would never tell him, how she loved him ; she would leave his life as untroublously as she came into it. And then ? She was too unexperienced to see ahead, although such big experiences had come to her in a very little time.

He was speaking.

" What happened this morning has altered things for you and me, Sonia."

" Yes ? " she assented softly.

"We cannot go on now," he said. "You know it, and I know it, isn't that so?"

She assented softly again, sitting very still in the high-backed chair, her hands on its arms.

From his end of the table, Dereham could look at her as much as he liked in the soft candle light, and she would never know how hungrily.

"Aren't you rather a long way off to talk?" she ventured, and he answered harshly,

"No."

There seemed to be an immeasurable distance between them, but his voice could measure it.

"You will divorce me, if you please, Sonia," he said.

She gasped.

"I don't understand——"

"About divorce?" he said. "It is, luckily, so simple to understand. Follet can explain to you if you'd rather."

He saw her shake her head, her fair hair lambent against the dark chair back.

"No, Hugo, you. If you please."

Sure?

"There is no reason," she said, much as she had said it to Selwinn, "for any one to come between you and me, Hugo."

He started.

"You mean—no reason for any one else to explain matters, Sonia?"

"That is what I mean," she said faintly.

She meant so much more; she meant a thousand things, and she felt as if irrevocably that she would never now be able to explain to him one of them.

"The procedure," he said, immediately sitting back again, "is that I leave you—apparently for some one else; you will divorce me; the case will go through undefended. Six months after it is heard, you will be

free. That is simple, isn't it? Could anything be more delightfully arranged? You will be free again."

"What is freedom for?" Although she whispered the words, they came clearly to him over the table.

"Usually," he said shortly, "as in this case, it is so that people can marry again where they will be happier."

"Ramonde," she thought, sitting very limp and relaxed in the heavy chair, her fingers nervously and silently drumming on its carved arms. "He wants Ramonde; they love each other, but he would never have offered her just six months of marriage so that she could be a servant, a secretary, like he offered me."

"Very well," she said in a little, quiet voice.

"There is no reason to lose any time," he continued.

She agreed in the same little voice.

"I expect you're thinking——" he began and paused, for she never had thought of money, had she? She hadn't seemed to care, though that demon of doubt in his breast had never really been silenced. It still said to him, "Surely she must have hoped to influence you, to cajole you into giving her all a woman might want?"

"You're thinking," he began again, "no doubt, about the financial side."

Again she shook her head and the candle light on her hair was the flicker of an aureole.

"It is no use being reticent about all that," he said. "A wife divorcing a wealthy husband gets good alimony."

"Alimony?" she repeated.

"You know what that is, don't you?"

Again that shake of the head was disconcerting.

It was well-nigh incredible, too.

"Alimony is the income that the law allows a wife whose husband has deserted her. He has to pay it. It is proportional."

Sonia cried out:

"Oh, how dare you!"

"I don't understand you, Sonia," he said. "There's no need for heroics. It's the law—generally expected."

"Not by me," she whispered, and again her whisper came clearly down the table.

"If," he said jerkily, "you're thinking that I have injured you enough already, by marrying you in such conditions, you're probably quite right. I guaranteed to die, didn't I? Now that I am going to live, all that I can do for you, as I see it, is to make amends as decently as I can. You must try not to feel too resentfully about"—his lip curled—"my change of plan."

She knew what he meant by change of plan. He was speaking of the renewal of life that Italian doctor had promised him. She cried out inarticulately against the brutality of the thought, which could take her own reactions so much for granted. The mellow room became to her an amphitheatre of sordid suspicions and accusations.

He went on, as if unheeding.

"Life is sweet; at least it is to most of us," he was thinking to himself. "Although it doesn't seem so very great to me at the moment." He said in a hard voice, "Both you and I are going to find life damned good, Sonia, in our ways."

They had to be separate ways. His with Ramonde, and hers . . . ?

She was only sure about Selwinn.

She did not want him.

"Well, Sonia?" said Dereham, "it is settled then? You won't need to go and see Follet; he will come to see you. There is no need for any delay; he can come to-morrow morning. I shall leave the house to-night."

"Leave your own house, Hugo?" she repeated, watching him with immense eyes. "Why?"

He sighed.

"You haven't understood. It is simply part of a form of procedure, and the sooner we get it all over, the better. Follet will explain. There'll be no awkwardness; no pain."

"No pain?" she cried out.

"You must get over your vanities, Sonia," he said. "I advise you."

"Vanity?"

"It is just vanity. A woman does feel like that at first."

"*I'll* leave the house, Hugo."

He half rose.

"No, no! You will not! Besides, that won't do; allow me to know. You've got to obey me in this one thing. This once more."

"Obey?"

"Yes, obey," he repeated, "I'm *ordering* you to stay here to-night, and to-morrow it shall all be smoothed out for you; the money, everything."

"I wouldn't touch your money, Hugo."

"What?" he said incredulously.

"I want nothing at all."

"That is impossible," he said curtly. "I've told you that men also have their vanity. You have my name; you are my wife. A man inevitably owes his wife certain things." She listened. "You thought, I daresay, when we first made our bargain, that I was damnably mean. I was, but I was bitter, you must forget that if you will. Yesterday, before I had been to this Italian fellow, Follet came here and took my instructions to change your settlements. I was leaving you every penny I had personally, after my death."

"I should not have taken it."

"Sonia," he almost stammered, "why?"

"Why? There is only one thing in life worth having," she said. "One thing only."

She repeated it very slowly.

"You're very definite," he said huskily. "A month ago you couldn't have made up your mind like that, could you, Sonia ?"

She agreed in that very quiet voice.

"No, I have learned a lot since then."

He could not cease thinking of Selwinn. It was with him she had been happy ; it was he who had taken her gaily to the pleasure places ; he who had made the sympathetic companion. Of course he was attracted, and to be attracted was, for the Selwinn type, the same as being in love. It was probably all the love they knew about.

He sat there staring at his wife across the table. She was not looking back at him. Her eyelids drooped, and now her restless hands were still. He tried to clear away those unreasonable mists of jealousy in his mind, and to think out just what had prompted her to refuse to accept money. It was surely just an outcry of surprise, a gesture which, to-morrow, she might manage gracefully to retract, after the lawyer Follet had talked to her strategically for a while.

He had never had this heartache for a woman before ; never suffered just this uncontrollable fury.

There was the kind of silence between them that might have fallen after a man and his wife had quarrelled bitterly and desperately, not that he knew that kind of silence, for he had never had a wife. That thought flamed up in him, "I have never had a wife." And he thought that perhaps in the future, when all these readjustments were made, he would seek for some true marriage, such as very occasionally one heard people speaking of, almost with bated breath.

He kept his eyes on Sonia. This might have been a true marriage if only her thoughts had not strayed from him to another man. He tried to force himself to

think about her only protectively. She did not know Selwinn yet, poor girl. She did not realise Selwinn himself; nor that he would not dream of making sacrifices for any woman alive, however desperately he might be attracted to her. He would not marry her unless she came to him with a well-filled purse. Time enough to explain that to her by and by! If Selwinn cared enough in his fashion, she might be allowed to assimilate that gently so that it would not hurt too much, and then Follet would do the rest.

"After to-night," he thought, "I shall never see her again. When I leave her to-night it will be for the last time. I could never have made her love me," he thought, "I haven't given her a chance."

The telephone bell rang faintly far off. Barton was at the door.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Sir Hugo."

Dereham did not even demand "Who is it?" He did not care. He stayed there deeply preoccupied and impatient with any interruption of his black thoughts.

"Put the call through."

Still his wife sat quite still with downcast eyes. He rose and picked up the telephone installed near the door. Sonia was listening and seeing with an extra sense. She seemed to hear the least fragment of sound either from inside or outside the house. The minutest sound was magnified to an intense importance, and she was strung up to react passionately to all. Suddenly her husband's voice came definitely into all those hundreds of tragments of little sounds. As soon as she heard him say, "Oh you, Ramonde?" she sprang up, ran past him on noiseless feet into the hall. It should indeed be she who would go! She saw Barton coming forward quickly, and she had no words for him. No kind of parleying should delay her, and she was out of

the house with the front door slammed behind her, with the summer night breeze on her face.

It was incidental that a disengaged taxi-cab was crawling by, having set down a fare at a neighbouring house. She was in it, an address automatically on her lips—the address of the Ladies' Residential Club at the end of the next street. How pure, how innocent, how ridiculously harmless for a wrought-up woman, prepared to welcome life at its most passionate stages! She thought that no one she had ever known had passed through an hour of life more passionate than she now experienced. Yet how could she know? She could only guess at things; guess, and guess, and guess!

She had no money with her.

Lingering consciousness of the dignity of being Lady Dereham, of owing Hugo perhaps just a little in the way of keeping up appearances, sent her fingers tapping the glass, and the driver slowed up. Hazily in her mind was the knowledge that to rush into that drab establishment, exotically dressed as she was, to ask for a room for the night, was rather a scandalous proceeding; stupid, too. It would be such a naïve confession—that after only three weeks of her marriage, with all the social consequence which it had brought in its train, the only place to which she could go in extremity was the house which had received her as a stranger, when she came to London for the first time, little Sonia May of Lulham.

"I'll ask Francis," she thought feverishly. "Francis will help." Just as feverishly as she thought, she spoke.

"Drive to No. 20 Belringer Mews."

"They all live in mews," she thought hectically, as the taxi-cab quickened pace again. "All" meant Ramonde Allett and Francis Selwinn, because as a matter of fact, they comprised most of her world outside

Dereham. That occurred to her, though she tried not to think as she sped along. But thoughts would come, and by the time she reached Selwinn's door, she felt mad with the sheer hectic muddle of them.

Supposing he wasn't in? She only feared that after she had dismissed the cab and knocked at his door. Her fear was for the moment justified, but a woman's head looked out of an opposite window.

" Mr. Selwinn is out at the moment, miss, but if you're a friend of his I'm sure you could go in and wait for him."

" I can't get in," Sonia said, uncaring of the effect she made.

" I clean for him," the woman at the window said, " and cook his breakfast. I've a key." She came down from her own rooms over a garage and unlocked the front door. She switched on a light as if entirely familiar with the workings of this small abode, closed the door and went away.

Sonia ran up narrow stairs, found an open door, and stumbled into a room, lighted by the moonlight. She knocked against a sort of divan, and sank down on it, only to remember that Selwinn had been going out to a theatre with a friend. But she said to herself, uncaring, " I shall wait."

Then just as if more miracles could happen on this day of devastating miracles, she heard through the open window Selwinn come singing softly a snatch of song, into the mews. His voice was unmistakable. It was even very dear to her in that moment, his voice and the way it had of humming snatches of inconsequential song. He would be here, in a minute, with her.

He ran upstairs straight into the room where she sat, switched on a light and saw her there upon the divan.

His astonishment was quickly overlaid by his surprised gratification.

"Sonia," he said. "But, my dear." He gave a quick look at the open window—had she no caution, silly little girl?—and switched off the light, turned on a softer lamp in a corner, and pulled the curtains across the window. He put his hat down and came over and sat on the divan beside her.

He thought this poor little Lady Dereham of the so short reign was a lovely child, and he had no doubt but that, whatever qualms he had on his own selfish account, she was for him. No hurry. There were ways and ways of achieving satisfactory results, Francis thought, as he laid an arm that seemed to her—in spite of his previous love declaration—to be brotherly, round Sonia's shoulder.

That previous declaration had been so carefully tempered—and he was thinking of it—to this lamb. Or, seeing she was what she was, she would not now be sitting here thus with him. Even she in her divine foolishness would have had more of that hard sense to which he had advised her.

"I didn't go to a show, after all," he said tenderly, giving her time for recovery of all her wits, because there was no doubt but that this talk between them must come to some lucidity. "The man I was looking for hadn't expected me. So I rushed home"—he paused a moment and his eyes rested on the telephone in a corner. He wished to get up and muffle the bell of that confounded instrument—"and here were you. What did you come to tell me, little Sonia?"

He put his hand under her chin and turned her face full to his.

"I want a little money, Francis," she said.

"Money!" he repeated. "Money, Sonia, money!"

"Five pounds," she said. "Less would do, I expect."

"You've surely some in your bank, dear?"

"That is Hugo's!"

"Oh, Sonia!" he said. And he settled her more comfortably beside him on the couch. She rested against him flatteringly without knowing that she flattered. She was too concentrated on other things to think of Francis. "Oh, Sonia! And the five pounds would be mine? And you wouldn't mind taking it from me?"

"I don't think so."

"You darling!" He checked himself. "Have I five pounds cash?" he thought. "No." He wedged a cushion behind her and pulled forward a footstool for her, and put her little feet upon it absurdly, one after the other, with a whimsical air of pretending that she could not move them by herself. He said, "It's yours, of course, dear little Sonia. But tell me what has happened. What brought you here?"

"Hugo wants me to divorce him at once. So I have left him."

"My God!" Selwinn said. She was too preoccupied to worry over the tensing of all his thoughts. She said:

"You see, Hugo is going to live."

"To live?"

He pulled himself sharply together, saying to himself, "I'm glad! Glad! damned glad!" and remembering with a disconcerting clarity the host of his unpaid bills and commitments.

"Sonia," he managed to say, "then he couldn't ask better than to live with you." And directly he had said that a rush of sentimentalism that had helped him over awkward moments before helped him to pictorialise the situation now. "So you are lost to me, little Sonia? Lost for good. I'll never have you now."

She was not listening, and he saw it. She did not want picturesque phrases of lamentation, sacrificial love making nor goddess-worship of the you-art-beyond-my-reach kind, so avidly swallowed by ninety women out of a hundred.

What did she want ?

He knew in a heady moment what he wanted. He wanted Sonia, here and now. Perhaps for always. If there were a divorce, they might marry . . . if there were not a divorce, they might love. Madness, and incredible. But true . . . And he heard her crying desperately :

" Hugo wants Ramonde."

Selwinn caught her in his arms.

Then she awakened to what lay in those two arms, and in his shining eyes, and on his amorous mouth. In a second she was startled, and unbelieving that, now, without warning, a man was going to make love to her as she had never been made love to before, as all those far off fade outs of girls in far off fade out Lulham dreamed some lover would do some day ; only some lover never did. And she cried, terrified :

" No, Francis, no ! No ! No ! "

But he said, " Yes, yes, I love you. I adore you. If Hugo doesn't want you, I do. You must love me, my sweetheart, or you wouldn't be here, asking for . . . five pounds ! You and your five pounds ! Oh, you sweet ! "

" No, Francis, no ! " she cried, and struggled desperately.

If Selwinn had really felt those struggles he would have let her go, but now he was holding her too fiercely. He did not feel them. She was gossamer in his arms, a butterfly fluttering.

" Yes ! " he almost shouted, but it was in a whisper, " Yes ! Yes ! "

He lifted her on tiptoe—she had no balance now—and kissed her. He awakened her. She put her arms round him and clung. He kissed her and adored her in words ecstatically, all together. He saw her eyes were closed. He saw her incredibly beautiful. Exulta-

tion filled him. His fierceness turned more tender, his arms more soft——

And suddenly she was out of them, tears on her flushed cheeks . . .

"Sonia," he said softly, "come back, and shut your eyes again."

"I shut my eyes so that I could think you were Hugo," she wailed.

"Sweetheart?" Francis stammered.

"I love Hugo," she wailed. "I don't want you, Francis. How could you think so. Just to imagine it was Hugo—I shut my eyes."

And her husband came very quietly into the room.

He was very white, with a curious little smile on his mouth, and his hands, which had clenched hard in the last minute, could not at once relax.

"Open your eyes, Sonia," he said, and came straight towards her, as if he did not see Selwinn at all. "Open your eyes, and don't shut them again."

Selwinn was a good loser and a perfect technician over a matter of tight corners. All his friends said that. He was dressing quickly in his eight-foot-by-ten box called a bedroom, timing all his movements so as not to lose a moment.

Of course he knew perfectly well how old Hugo had arrived. He himself had bounced in, leaving the front door ajar, leaving the sitting-room door ajar, meaning to do just what he was doing now—namely, to change into evening clothes—and he had found Sonia and forgotten everything. Poor old Hugo, coming quietly upstairs, had heard . . .

Lucky old Hugo, coming so quietly upstairs, had heard what perhaps, after all, he would rather hear than anything else in the world.

Men were queer. Love was queer.

Selwinn himself had not uttered a word. He had just walked gracefully out, leaving the field clear.

No hard words. No bones broken.

Technique.

He had only felt what happened behind him as he closed his bedroom door without so much as a backward glance at them.

Eye opener for old Hugo and served him right. Always damned cynical and regimental where women were concerned.

Eye opener for little Sonia. The darling. The sweet.

"I'd have done it and stuck by it, and thought myself lucky," Francis said to himself as he took a clean handkerchief of the finest weave—the best was almost good enough for him—from a drawer, and dashed a little lavender water on it.

"Eye opener for me," he added thoughtfully.

He could not stay there in his bedroom for ever, and they were still murmuring in an unmistakable fashion, those two. Sonia had laughed a little in the way a girl does when she might just as well cry for sheer happiness. He shuffled his feet about, banged a drawer shut, allowed half a minute, and went in.

The moment of entry, he had thought as he dressed, might be faintly awkward, because if Hugo had heard one thing, he had probably heard more, and Sonia . . . Sonia would not quite have forgotten yet.

It was queer, what little things sometimes saved a difficulty. He had barely glanced at them with his most reassuring, understanding and apologetic smile, when his telephone rang, so he could turn to pick up the receiver.

"Hello . . . hello! Oh, yes, Ramonde. I know I said half an hour . . . but I was detained, old girl, when I got home. Dressed now. With you in a brace of shakes . . . Country Club? Grand!"

Now he could turn round safely. He settled his tie and gave a pull at his white waistcoat.

"Er—rang up Ramonde when I couldn't get the chap I was after. Er—I'd forgotten she was waiting. I must be off. You'll excuse me. No hurry for you two."

So he came over to the couch where they sat now, and kissed Sonia's hand, very warmly shook Hugo's, and went out.

"I think Francis is wonderful!" said Sonia in a little hush as they listened for his final departure. And then she laughed for the first time, mischievously, like a woman of the world.

"There's only one wonder in the world to me to-night," said Dereham. "So if he's really gone, come here."